

# THE WHITNEY RING TRIGGER POCKET REVOLVER

by Frank Graves



Whitney Ring Trigger Pocket Revolver, serial number 1.

## INTRODUCTION

Due to the popularity of Colt's revolvers in the late 1840s and early 1850s, many firearms makers were attempting to manufacture and sell their own versions of a self-revolving firearm. The biggest problem with this was that Samuel Colt and his able attorneys, with almost limitless funding, were very proactive in preserving and protecting the patents of Colt and infringement suits were a real threat to these other makers.

Many of the biggest names that we know of today tried, some with success, to invent and patent their version of a self-revolving firearm before the Colt patents expired in 1857. One of those, no stranger to Samuel Colt, was Eli Whitney, Jr., who was the actual producer of the Colt Walker revolver that established Samuel Colt into the history books. Whitney had provided the manufacturing facilities for the Colt Walker and was certainly familiar with the process of manufacturing firearms.

Eli Whitney, Jr's father, Eli Whitney, had much of his own success with manufacturing and supplying muskets to the United States Army and his company had been in business since the late 1700s until Eli Whitney Jr. took it over in 1842.<sup>1</sup> But he, as did many other makers, realized the potential of the automatically revolving firearms and in about 1850 he set about trying to come up with a patentable revolving firearm that would not raise the potential legal threat of an infringement suit by his former partner.

Whitney first began with various attempts to be not only patentable but also practical - not only in cost of manufacture but simplicity of operation. This, as many others found, was more difficult than probably originally perceived.

In 1850, Whitney first produced the Whitney Hooded Cylinder Revolvers in scant quantities, estimated at only 200 pistols. He apparently was afraid of infringement on Colt's patent of producing an automatically revolving pistol, so with one exception, these few Hooded Cylinder Revolvers had hand rotated cylinders.<sup>2</sup> These were small .28 caliber revolvers and apparently met with little success and an attempted patent for them was unsuccessful as well.

Whitney then produced the Whitney Two Trigger Pocket revolver in larger quantities from about 1852 to 1854. These were operated by cocking the hammer, then pulling back the front second trigger which allowed the cylinder to be hand rotated. Releasing the front trigger locked the cylinder into place. Then the shooter would finish by pulling the rear trigger to fire the pistol. Attempts to patent this revolver did not succeed either. They were slightly larger in size and .32 caliber.

Whitney's third attempt for a revolver patent did finally succeed with the Whitney Ring Trigger Pocket Revolver, Patent Number 11,447 issued on August 1, 1854. It had been reported earlier that about 50 of these were made, but apparently just one example was made which is the topic of this article.



Left side of Whitney Ring Trigger Pocket Revolver Serial Number 1.

From the patent, the operation of this pistol is described as first cocking the hammer, which releases a stop on the cylinder, allowing it to be able to rotate. Then the shooter pulls back on the ring trigger that rotates the cylinder and at the end of that rotation, a cylinder stop locks the cylinder in place and finally at the end of the pull of the ring trigger, the hammer is released to fall and fire the shot. Unlike many firearms patents that show a conceptual view of the firearm, the pistol pictured in the patent is identical down to the last detail of Whitney Ring Trigger Pocket Revolver serial number 1.

This revolver is .31 caliber with a 4" barrel. It is very finely finished and tastefully engraved. With the exception of the case-hardened ring trigger and the hammer, the iron parts are blued. The etched cylinder engraving is particularly more carefully done than other similar cylinders treated this way at the Whitney factory. The grips are of rosewood. It is stamped serial number 1 on all major parts. There are no other markings as to the maker anywhere on the revolver. It is in very fine unfired condition.

Despite the reports of approximately 50 being produced, this is the only known example. I have asked many collectors of Whitney firearms as well as general American percussion firearms collectors if they have ever seen or heard of another example than this one and all said that they had not heard of or seen another one. Every reference book from Fuller's *The Whitney Firearms*<sup>3</sup> of 1946, *The William M. Locke Collection*<sup>4</sup> of 1973 and *Flayderman's Guide to Antique American Firearms, 9th Edition*<sup>1</sup> of 2007 all illustrate this model with a photograph of only this exact revolver.

I believe that Whitney produced this pistol at the time that the patent 11,447 of August 1, 1854 was being developed. As we know, many firearms makers made prototypes to show to potential investors as well as to illustrate the patents to them and others. This pistol appears to have been made for those purposes and as apparently no others exist, Whitney certainly did not commence with the manufacture of this model for sale to the public.

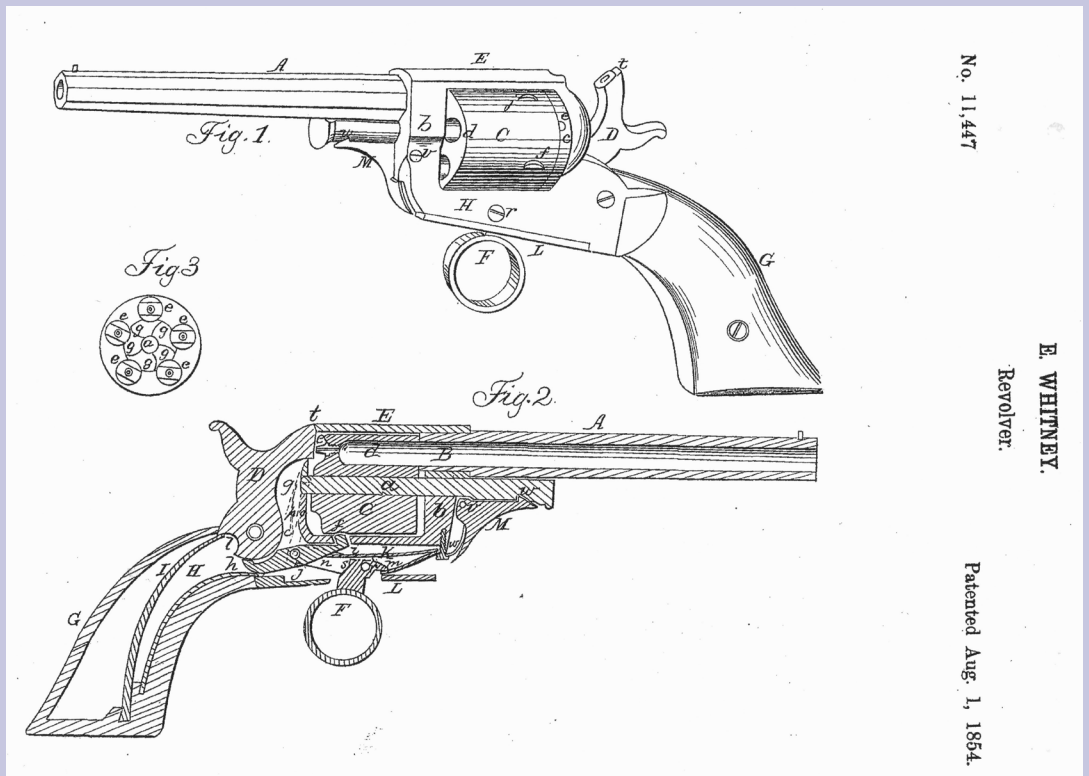
Very shortly after this patent was made, Whitney successfully patented, on September 26, 1854, the somewhat similar Whitney-Beals (or more popularly known Walking Beam Pocket Revolver), another ring trigger, small caliber revolver, that appears to have been slightly less complicated and easier to manufacture and was manufactured in some quantity.

If any of our members or readers are familiar with any other example of this revolver, I would certainly be interested in hearing of it.

#### Endnotes

- 1 Flayderman, Norm. *Flayderman's Guide to Antique American Firearms...and Their Values, 9th Edition*, 2007, p. 277
- 2 Goodson, Jeff and Philip Boulton. *The Survival Files #3, The Texas Gun Collector*, Spring, 2020, page 65. There was a singular Hooded Cylinder Revolver known in .36 caliber, that featured a cylinder that would revolve by cocking the hammer. It violated Colt's patents.
- 3 Fuller, C. E. *The Whitney Firearms*. Standard Publication, Inc. 1946
- 4 Sellers, Frank. *The William M. Locke Collection*. Antique Armory/Berryman's. 1973

Whitney patent 11,447 of August 1, 1854



Serial number 1 marking under barrel

