

COLT'S FRONTIER SIX SHOOTER

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In 1873, the Winchester Repeating Arms Company introduced the .44-40 Winchester Central Fire cartridge (this later became the Winchester Center Fire cartridge, .44-40 WCF). This was the first metallic centerfire cartridge manufactured by Winchester and was promoted as the standard chambering for their new model 1873 rifle.¹ The .44-40 designation for this cartridge indicated a .44 caliber projectile powered by 40 grains of black powder. In the same year, Colt's Patent Fire Arms Manufacturing Company released the .45 Colt Single Action Army revolver soon to be known as "The Peacemaker". By 1877, with Winchester threatening to produce a .44-40 revolver of their own, Colt introduced the Single Action Army in .44-40 caliber. The advantage of having a rifle and pistol chambered for the same cartridge made these two weapons wildly popular among lawmen and outlaws as well as the everyday frontiersman.

Developmental History

A common belief is that Colt developed the .44-40 revolver to make it compatible with the model 1873 Winchester rifle as the same ammunition was used in both. But that was not the case. Winchester and Colt were staunch competitors in the growing firearms industry, and world-wide demand for Winchester's rifles far exceeded Colt's revolvers. As early as 1872 Winchester was already involved in developing their own .44-40 caliber revolver, and Colt needed to beat them to the finish line, and fast.

The Winchester Revolver

In June of 1872, Oliver Winchester hired gunsmiths William W. Wetmore and Charles W. Wells, to design and develop a Winchester revolver. Both were former employees of the Smith and Wesson Company, and Winchester believed they would produce a gun superior to anything Colt would present. After four years of hard work Winchester exhibited prototypes at the famous 1876

Philadelphia Exhibition along with their current line of production rifles. The revolvers however remained technically problematic and in July of that year, Winchester added one of their own engineers to the development team, Stephen W. Wood. Wood redesigned the Wetmore-Wells gun and created a six shot, .44-40 caliber revolver with a swing-out cylinder, a design well ahead of its time. Samples of the revolver were presented by Winchester to the U. S. Navy Ordnance Bureau, which declined placing an order. Samples were also presented to the government of Turkey, and in June of 1877 the Sultan of Turkey placed an order for 30,000 revolvers, now officially named the Model 1877 Winchester revolver.

Colt Responds to News of Winchester's Contract With Turkey

The news regarding Winchester's presentation in Turkey came to the attention of Colt's agent in London, Baron Von Oppen. Von Oppen immediately contacted Colt's vice president, General W. B. Franklin and alerted him regarding the territorial gains in Turkey by Winchester. Franklin acted quickly, believing that the Turkish Army was equipped with M1873 rifles chambered for .44-40 cartridges, and sent three Colt .44-40 revolvers by steamship to the London Agency on April 27, 1877. Their serial numbers were 36026, 36264 and 36327, respectively. Franklin instructed Von Oppen to forward the revolvers for trial to Mr. Stevenson, the Colt agent in Constantinople. Von Oppen was to explain to Mr. Stevenson that the revolvers were chambered in the .44-40 WCF cartridge, as was the Winchester revolver. Franklin however, was mistaken regarding the Turkish rifles: they were .44 caliber Henry rimfires, not M1873 .44-40 calibers. But the Colt .44-40 revolvers were already en route and Franklin quickly sent three more revolvers, this time in .44 rimfire caliber. For reasons unknown, a con-



Figure 1. Colt's Single Action Army serial number 31392 is a rare, .44-40 prototype.

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Figure 2. Colt Single Action Army revolver, serial number 40956, caliber .44-40 WCF, left side of revolver.

tract from the Turkish government never materialized for either Winchester or Colt revolvers. These events however convinced Colt to proceed with a large scale production of the .44-40 Colt Single Action Army.

Colt's Early Prototype

Colt's Single Action Army serial number 31392 is a rare, .44-40 prototype having the lowest known serial number of all the .44-40 revolvers (Figure 1). Manufactured in the latter part of 1876, it was once held in the Colt Factory Museum of Fire Arms and listed in the Collection Inventory of Arms as early as 1880 and 1887. The Colt Factory Museum Collection was donated to the Connecticut State Library in 1957 and this revolver was deaccessioned from that collection in 1980. It has a blued and case hardened finish, varnished walnut grips and a 7 1/2 inch barrel. The barrel has six lands and grooves as well as the rare, early "italic script" address. The script roll on the barrel was discontinued in the serial number range 21000 - 22000. These facts indicate that the barrel used in the manufacture of this revolver was likely originally intended for

use in one of the early .44 caliber Colt rimfire revolvers left over after production of this model ceased.

Early First Production Colt Single Action Army in .44-40

In 1872, Colt was manufacturing the new Army "Strap" pistol (later known as the Colt Single Action Army) chambered in .44 Smith and Wesson Russian, but then converted to .44 Smith and Wesson American in preparation for the U.S. Government Ordinance tests. In anticipation of receiving the U.S. Army contract, Colt began manufacturing .44 caliber revolvers which utilized state of the art, seven land and groove gain twist barrels. However, the Army changed its requirement to a .45 caliber cartridge which left a large number of unused .44 caliber barrels which were placed in storage. Colt's policy of not wasting spare parts resulted in these barrels being used during the early production of the Colt revolver chambered in .44-40.

All of these revolvers fall in the serial number range 40000 to 41000. Such is the case with Colt Single Action Army revolver, se-



Figure 3. Serial number 40956, close up left side of revolver. Note caliber marking on rear flat of trigger guard ".44 CF".



Figure 4. Block style barrel address for Colt Single Action Army revolver, serial number 40956, caliber .44-40 WCF.

rial number 40956, caliber .44-40 WCF, barrel length 7 1/2", blued and case hardened with varnished walnut stocks, shipped to H & D Folsom Arms Company, New York, New York on December 28, 1877 (Figures 2, 3 and 4).⁹ This rare revolver is one of only four known with a seven land and groove barrel with gain twist rifling. At the time it was assembled in 1877, seven land and groove barrels with gain twist rifling were obsolete, but Colt used the 1872 unused barrel in the manufacture of serial number 40956.

Naming The New .44-40 Colt Revolver

A group of five distributors, known as the "Colt Allies" consisted of Schuyler, Hartley & Graham, J. P. Moore's Sons, H & D Folsom, Spies and Kissan (all from New York) and Benjamin Kittredge of Cincinnati. These distributors contracted with Colt in 1875 to buy 12,000 Colt Single Action Army revolvers and to handle advertising and promotion. A new name would be required to differentiate between the .45 caliber "Peacemaker" and the .44-40 caliber revolver. The Peacemaker had been named by Benjamin Kittredge & Company which used the name on a broadside advertisement along with an illustration of the revolver, simplifying ordering. The first .44-40 caliber revolvers that were shipped domestically went to J. P. Moore's Sons on November 30, 1877. On January 17, 1878, they sent a letter to Hugh Harbison, Colt treasurer (who personally handled the Colt Allies' accounts) and requested that in forthcoming shipments the name "Frontier Six Shooter" be etched on the barrels. Colt recognized this suggestion as a great marketing idea and added their name to the proposed panel. Thus the name for the Single Action Army in .44-40 caliber was coined "Colt Frontier Six Shooter". J. P. Moore's Son's received the first .44-40 caliber revolvers with etched barrels on February 6, 1878.

The Acid Etching Process

Colt had prior experience with a process which would etch a desired barrel marking a few thousandths of an inch depth into the metal with an acid solution. After the barrel was polished, a masking or template would be applied to protect the metal that was to remain unetched. An acid solution was then applied which would etch away the background 10 to 15 thousandths of an inch

into the metal. The template was then removed revealing the markings. This method was used to apply the new "Colt Frontier Six Shooter" moniker to the barrel, and was a quick and inexpensive way to identify the new Single Action revolver (Figure 5). Unfortunately due to the fragile nature of this panel marking, it wore off quickly, even with little use in the field. The only caliber marking remaining would be the .44 CF stamp on the rear trigger guard flat. In mid-1889 Colt introduced a die that would emboss the marking which was durable and lasted for the life of the revolver. This roll die marking was used for the remaining years of production.⁶

The Models

The Colt Frontier Six Shooter manufactured in the largest numbers was a blued and case hardened revolver. Nickel was an alternative finish offered by Colt, but was only 30% (approximately) of all revolvers manufactured. A variety of barrel lengths were available with the most common being 7 1/2", 5 1/2" and 4 3/4" (Figures 6-8). The 7 1/2" barrel was the most popular length until 1889 when 57% of orders were for the 4 3/4" barrel. Plain revolvers were equipped with varnished walnut grips until 1882 and serial number range 75000 at which time a change was made to substitute rubber for wood as the standard grip material. In 1889, in serial number range 128000 the acid etch method of inscribing the motto "Colt Frontier Six Shooter" was changed to the roll die method.

As was the case with other Colt Single Action Army revolvers, the Colt Frontier Six Shooter was available with special features and finishes. This included engraving, grips of pearl, ivory and ebony as well as finishes of gold and silver. One such revolver, serial number 127460, is an exceptional example (Figure 9). It is a deluxe, factory engraved, nickel and gold plated revolver with a 4 3/4" barrel. In addition, it has pearl stocks with an incised and enameled American Eagle. The Colt archives revealed only five .44-40 caliber engraved revolvers with 4 3/4" barrels, gold plated cylinders and pearl stocks were ever shipped. The engraving was done by or under the direct supervision of Cuno Helfricht, Colt's master engraver from 1871 to 1921.



Figure 5. Acid etched "Colt Frontier Six Shooter" barrel marking.

Figure 6. Colt Frontier Six Shooter serial number 57457. 7 1/2" barrel, blued and case hardened finish with varnished walnut stocks. Manufactured and shipped 1880 to J. C. Grubb & Co., Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.⁹



Figure 7. Colt Frontier Six Shooter, serial number 107913. 4 3/4" barrel, blued and case hardened with varnished walnut stocks. Manufactured and shipped in 1884 to Schoverling, Daly and Gates, New York, New York.⁹



Sheriff's Models (ejectorless)

A variation of the Colt Frontier Six Shooter were those that lacked ejector assemblies (Figure 10). This interesting variation is referred to by collectors as the "Sheriff's model" or "Storekeeper's model". In addition to the lack of an ejector housing assembly, the characteristics of this model included the fact that 99% of them had barrel lengths less than 4 3/4". This configuration made them easy for concealed carry, hence the nickname "Sheriff's/Storekeepers" models. Ejectorless models were available in other calibers as well. Only 127 ejectorless Colt revolvers in .44-40 caliber were recorded as shipped from the factory.

Of the 127 ejectorless Colt revolvers chambered in .44-40 caliber, there were only five factory engraved revolvers manufactured and shipped.¹¹ One such example is serial number 115126, with nickel finish, pearl grips and 2 1/2" barrel (Figure 11). This revolver was shipped February 3, 1886 to A.G. Spaulding Brothers, Chicago, Illinois. This exceptional example was the only one manufactured which was engraved, having a 2 1/2" barrel. It was the recipient of an NRA Silver Medal in 2018.

Smooth Bore

A limited number of Colt Frontier Six Shooters were manufactured with smooth bore barrels. There were only 19 made and of those only five had 7 1/2", smooth bore barrels (Figure

12). These were designed for exhibition shooting and were used in Wild West shows. The cartridges were loaded with lead shot which made shooting glass balls thrown in the air by an assistant relatively easy.

Arizona Ranger Jeff Kidder and his Colt Frontier Six Shooter

Colt Frontier Six Shooter serial number 246844 is factory engraved and silver plated with American Eagle pearl grips and a 5 1/2" barrel (Figure 13). It was owned by Sergeant Jefferson Kidder of the Arizona Rangers. Because of the extreme lawlessness in the southern Arizona territory at the turn of the century, Governor Nathan Murphy, along with the territory legislature passed a bill establishing the Arizona Rangers on March 21, 1901. Born November 5, 1875 in Vermilion, South Dakota, Jeff Kidder enlisted in the Arizona Rangers on April 1, 1903. He spent the majority of his time on horseback patrolling the Arizona-Mexican border. In his spare time, he relentlessly practiced both his fast draw and shooting skills. With money inherited from his father's estate, he ordered the special Colt Frontier Six Shooter revolver which he received in early January 1905. During the execution of his duties he was known for several gun fights in which he killed and wounded many adversaries breaking the law. In March of 1907, he was promoted to the rank of sergeant. He returned serial number 246844 to the factory in December of 1907 to have the silver plat-

ing reapplied and the trigger repaired, both damaged by heavy use.

On Friday, April 3, 1908 he crossed the U. S. Mexican border to meet an informant regarding illegal smuggling activity. After spending time with a "soiled dove" named "Chia", he afterwards noted that a silver dollar was missing from his vest pocket. Grabbing her arm, he accused Chia of stealing it. She slapped Kidder and screamed "Policia!". Within minutes two Mexican police officers entered the cantina and opened fire. One of the shots hit Kidder just above his navel. He returned fire after falling to the floor, wounding both officers. He then tried to flee for the border which was only 300 yards away, but was chased down by several Mexican police officers who beat him with their rifles and dragged

him to a jail cell, leaving him on the floor without medical attention. Word soon reached American Rangers, and a Mexican judge allowed Kidder to be moved to a private home. He was attended by a physician who crossed the border from Bisbee, but died of his wounds at 6:30 Sunday morning on April 1, 1908. When Mexican authorities refused to release his body, one thousand plus men gathered at the border and threatened to bring his body back by force. The Mexican authorities relented and released Kidder's body, allowing its removal along with his belongings, including this revolver. He was taken to a Bisbee funeral home for embalming and afterwards his body was shipped to California for internment.



Figure 8. Colt Frontier Six Shooter, serial number 55093. .44-40 caliber, blued and case hardened, 7 1/2" barrel with wood grips. Used by Pat Garrett to kill Billy The Kid at Pete Maxwell's ranch, July 14, 1881.⁹



Figure 9. Colt Frontier Six Shooter, Serial number 127460. .44-40 with 4 3/4" barrel. Nickel and gold plated, factory engraved with pearl stocks featuring an incised, enameled American Eagle.⁹

Figure 10. Colt Frontier Six Shooter, serial number 108752. .44-40 caliber with 4" barrel. Sheriff's model, blued and case hardened. Wood stocks. Manufactured in 1884 and shipped January 6, 1885 to J. P. Moore's Sons, New York, New York.⁹



A Wise Decision

The decision to introduce the Colt Frontier Six Shooter was profitable, and ultimately comprised 20% of all Single Action Army sales across the board.⁶ Only the .45 caliber Peacemaker model sold more units for Colt, and the Winchester revolver never made it to market - but why?

In December 1879 Winchester selected Major General William F. Smith as the manager of the Winchester New York sales agency. Smith was a native New Yorker and previously commissioner of the New York Police Department. He had also served as a corps commander in the Army of the Potomac in the Civil War, and was an ideal replacement for the retiring Charles L Mitchell. At General Smith's recommendation, the Winchester Company contracted with Christopher G. Bonehill of England to produce quality double-barreled shotguns at a very competitive price point. Colt also

made a high quality double-barreled shotgun and by 1882, sales of Winchester's imported shotguns had significantly impacted the sale of Colt's shotgun in New York. In retaliation, Colt began the development of a .44-40 caliber lever action rifle based on a design by Andrew Burgess and R. L. Brewer. This new rifle would directly compete with the Winchester model 1873 rifle. However, the competition became contentious when Colt became aware of Winchester's plans to openly compete with them in the revolver market (Figure 14). General Franklin realized that unending corporate warfare could be financially disastrous, and a meeting on June 1, 1884 between the two companies resulted in a gentleman's agreement. Colt would no longer produce lever action rifles and Winchester would not produce pistols. This agreement was honored by both companies throughout their histories.

Figure 11. Colt Frontier Six Shooter Sheriff's model, serial number 115126. .44-40 caliber, 2 1/2" barrel, ejectorless. Nickel finish, pearl grips and factory engraved. Shipped February 3, 1886 to A. G. Spaulding Brothers, Chicago, Illinois. One of one manufactured. NRA silver medal 2018.⁹





Figure 12. Colt Frontier Six Shooter, serial number 157892. .44-40 caliber, 7 1/2" smooth bore barrel, blued and case hardened, rubber stocks. Shipped August 27, 1894 to Hartley & Graham, New York, New York.⁹



Figure 13. Colt Frontier Six Shooter belonging to Arizona Ranger Jeff Kidder, serial number 246844. 5 1/2" barrel, silver plated. Pearl carved grips with carved American Eagle motif. Shipped to Baker and Hamilton, San Francisco, California, December 29, 1904 (top). Carved American Eagle on pearl grips (bottom).⁹



Figure 14. Winchester revolver, left side view (top) and swing out cylinder view (bottom).

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