

THE JOSEPH ROCK COOPER TRANSITION REVOLVER - A MISSING SIBLING IS DISCOVERED.

by Matthew Schneiderman

Here's an antique firearms story spanning forty-four years.

1978: I am collecting pepperboxes.¹ I buy an underhammer one by Joseph Rock Cooper (Figure 1). It is six shot, ring trigger, double action and .38 caliber. Stamped: J.R. Cooper's Patent (#8347, January 21, 1840), referring to the horizontal nipple placement (which Cooper did not originate). This supposedly gave a more direct ignition flame and less chance of misfiring. The underhammer sought a different way of avoiding obstruction to sighting.



Figure 1. The J.R. Cooper underhammer pepperbox. Photo courtesy of Roy Marcot and Ron Paxton.

1979: I begin collecting transition revolvers.² I buy one by Thomas K. Baker of 88 Fleet St. London, 1852. (Figure 2). Baker took out a registered design #3230, of April 24, 1852 for "A Lever Cock or Hammer for Firearms". This distinctive spurred, offset, notched bar hammer and also tried to solve the problem of interference with sighting.



Figure 2. The Thomas K. Baker transition revolver. Photo courtesy of Roy Marcot and Ron Paxton.

1981: I find one of the most bizarre firearms I had ever seen, a J. R. Cooper transition revolver (Figures 3 and 4). Six shot, ring trigger, double action, rifled, top slide safety; folding front sight. It remains one of the strangest pieces ever. The number 4 appears on the barrel.



Figure 3. "My" J.R. Cooper transition revolver, #4. Photo courtesy of Roy Marcot and Ron Paxton.

Dear Sir,

Thank you for your kind order received today together with your cheque value \$640. We are pleased to confirm that item A.849 is still available and will be packed and despatched to you via air mail within the next few days.

I have no doubt whatsoever that this pistol is not a conversion of any sort but is most probably a 'one-off' piece made either to special order or as an example of the gunmaking ingenuity.

Assuring you of our best attention at all times.

Yours faithfully,

L.T. Brookes.

Figure 4. My sales receipt for the J.R. Cooper transition revolver. Note L.T. Brookes' comment, "...[it] is most probably a 'one-off' piece...."

Joseph Rock Cooper and His Underhammer Transition Revolver

By Matthew Schneiderman

Photos by Dean Arnold

Joseph Rock Cooper, prolific gun maker, merchant, and patentee, is well known to collectors of English revolvers and pepperboxes; the frequent appearance of his pieces in dealer advertisements and at gun shows should make him of interest to others as well.

J.R. Cooper worked in Birmingham from 1838 to 1863: at 24 Legge St. to 1854, on Woodcock St. to 1859, and then at 77 Baggot St.; he may have had a New York City retail outlet around 1850. He had stand 241 at the Great London Exhibition of 1851, showing 6 and 12 barrel pepperboxes.

The most common Cooper pistol is a double-action, ring-trigger, underhammer, percussion pepperbox, similar to the Belgian-patented "Marréte" system. Most have minimal engraving, plain bag grips, and German silver frames; a few are fancier, and some have slide safeties. Most have 6 barrels; figure 1 shows an example.

Cooper pepperboxes, and some similar pieces by other makers, are marked "J.R. Cooper Patent" or "...Patentee." No patent numbers appear. Cooper was one of the most patent-hungry of English gunmakers: he obtained 24 firearms-related patents, although few were ever applied. Oddly enough, none is for a ring-trigger underhammer pepperbox. So what does the "Patent" marking mean? Patent #8347 (1840) described, among other things, setting the nipple into the breech in line with the long axis of the barrel, not perpendicular to it. This gave a "nearly central fire", Cooper claimed, and applied a more direct flame to the charge and, supposedly, resulted in fewer misfires. Other pepperboxes do this (Budding, and Deane, in England; Marréte's on the Continent; Blunt & Syms, Pecare & Smith, Robbins & Lawrence in the U.S.A.), but Cooper's claim seems to have been generally accepted in England.

The basic purpose of underhammer construction, aside from simplicity and a lesser chance of copper cap bits in the eye, is unobstructed sighting. One can argue that careful aiming wasn't too important with these pistols (and that top-sighting when the lowermost barrel fires isn't too helpful), but in the very competitive English firearms market of the 1850's, any innovation provided a selling point. Capitalism made this period a collector's dream, with competing styles, mechanical ingenuity, and odd variations. Pepperboxes, transition revolvers, and the earliest modern-style revolvers coexisted.

Now, suppose you wanted a multi-shot underhammer firearm with one barrel, perhaps for greater accuracy: how would you construct an underhammer revolver? It's not that easy! One solution was the Cochran turret, a flat cylinder revolving horizontally.

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Figure 1. A typical J.R. Cooper underhammer pepperbox.



Figure 2. The J.R. Cooper underhammer transition revolver.



Figure 3. The pepperbox and revolver together.

A somewhat stranger solution is shown in figure 2.

This pistol is not a conversion. In the competitive scramble to supply revolvers in the 1850's, the "transition" style revolver was easy to make from parts on hand and required no new weapons design; it got the product to market fast. In response to a, perhaps unique,

request from a customer, Cooper did the same thing as other transition-revolver makers; but his mechanisms were underhammer, so his answer took some quick thinking, some ingenuity, and a long front sight.

Cooper's underhammer piece is a true transition revolver: it combines the distinctive lock case, mechanism, and grips of the pepperbox with the compact cylinder and single

THE GUN REPORT

Figure 5. Gun Report article on the J.R. Cooper underhammer transition revolver.³

2013 (January): I have already sold many of my pepperboxes, keeping only the early hand-turned ones, which I still collect. The transition revolver collection has reached a dead end, and I sell them all.⁴ It's time to move in other directions. The Cooper transition revolver goes to a dealer at the Las Vegas show for U.S. \$1,350.

2013 (April): The dealer sells the Cooper transition revolver at Bonhams London, April 24, 2013, lot 420, for £2,500 (pounds) hammer. The British pound is worth U.S. \$1.53, so \$3,825. This is a typical result for almost all the sales in my collecting career. (Figure 6. Note, incidentally, that lots 421 and 422 on this catalogue page are very rare pepperboxes.) The lot description ends with, "This appears to be the only example extant."



419
An 80-Bore J.R. Cooper Patent Under-Hammer Six-Shot Percussion Pepperbox Revolver
 Mid-19th Century
 With fluted barrels (one nipple missing), border engraved rounded action and butt decorated with scrolling foliage, the action engraved 'J.R. Cooper's Patent' on one side, ring-trigger, and varnished figured rounded grips (one split, some rust patination), Birmingham proof marks
 7.6 cm. barrels
 £300 - 400
 €350 - 470
 US\$450 - 610

420
An Extremely Rare 54-Bore Cooper Patent Transitional Under-Hammer Six-Shot Percussion Revolver
 Signed J.R. Cooper, Patent, No. 4, Mid-19th Century
 With blued two-stage barrel with octagonal breech and fitted in an upside down position, sprung folding fore-sight, blued cylinder, border engraved rounded action and butt decorated with scrolling foliage, the former signed on a scroll on one side, ring trigger, thumbpiece safety-catch also forming the back-sight, figured rounded grips, and much original blueing, Birmingham proof marks
 13.5 cm. barrel
 £2,000 - 2,500
 €2,300 - 2,900
 US\$3,000 - 3,800

This appears to be the only example extant.

421 *
A Rare And Unusual 140-Bore Seven-Barrelled Percussion Box-Lock Pepperbox Revolver
 By Lewis & Tomes, Mid-19th Century
 With hand-rotated case-hardened turn-off barrels each engraved with foliage around the muzzle and some numbered at the breech, cylindrical breech-housing engraved with flower-heads, nipple-shield engraved with foliage and with knurled border, border engraved action decorated with foliage on each side and signed within a scroll on one side, dolphin hammer, engraved thumb-piece safety-catch, folding trigger, foliate engraved ovoidal butt-cap with hinged circular butt-trap cover, finely chequered figured rounded butt, white-metal escutcheon engraved 'Geo. I. Rogers. 1863.', and retaining some original finish
 5 cm. barrels
 £1,800 - 2,200
 €2,100 - 2,600
 US\$2,700 - 3,300

Lewis & Tomes probably refers to the partnership of George Edward Lewis of Birmingham and William James Tomes, gunmakers of Soho, London, whose partnership is recorded between 1852 and 1908

For a very similar example signed Nock, London, see Claude Blair, *Pistols of the World*, 1968, p. 126, no. 518

422
An Extremely Rare Smith's Patent Magazine & Self-Priming Six-Shot Self-Cocking Percussion Pepperbox Revolver
 By Chas. J. Smith, 61 King William St., City, London, No. 21, Circa 1845
 With fluted barrels each with white-metal fore-sight and numbered from '1' to '6' at the breech, foliate scroll engraved enclosed action with circular white-metal striker-plate, the action cover secured by screws, incorporating the back-sight and engraved 'Chas. J. Smith's Patent Magazine & Self Priming Pistol, 61 King William St., City, London', foliate scroll engraved serial numbered trigger-guard and butt-cap, the latter with hinged circular butt-trap cover, finely chequered figured rounded butt, and vacant silver escutcheon (some rust patination), London proof marks
 8.7 cm. barrels
 £1,000 - 1,400
 €1,200 - 1,600
 US\$1,500 - 2,100

This revolver incorporates British Patent No. 10,667 of 14 May 1845. For more information and for an illustration of this type of revolver used in the maker's advertisement placed in Salter's *Commercial Directory for Birmingham* of 1848, see A.W.F. Taylerson, R.A.N. Andrews and J. Frith, *The Revolver 1818-1865*, 1968, pp. 55, 56 and 296, fig. 7

Figure 6. The auction catalogue page with lot 420. Courtesy of Bonhams.

2022 (April): The Australian collector, researcher and writer John McLean sends me a photo of a J. R. Cooper transition revolver (Figure 7). The number 32 appears on the barrel. Compare it to Figure 3: “mine” did not have proof and view marks on the right side, and was numbered 4, not 32. John knows nothing about my Cooper history, but knows something about my collecting interests. Rechecking his files, he discovers the photo is from the Rock Island Auction of December 5, 2014, lot 1141, which I had completely failed to notice. The price realized, with buyer’s premium, was U.S. \$3,163.

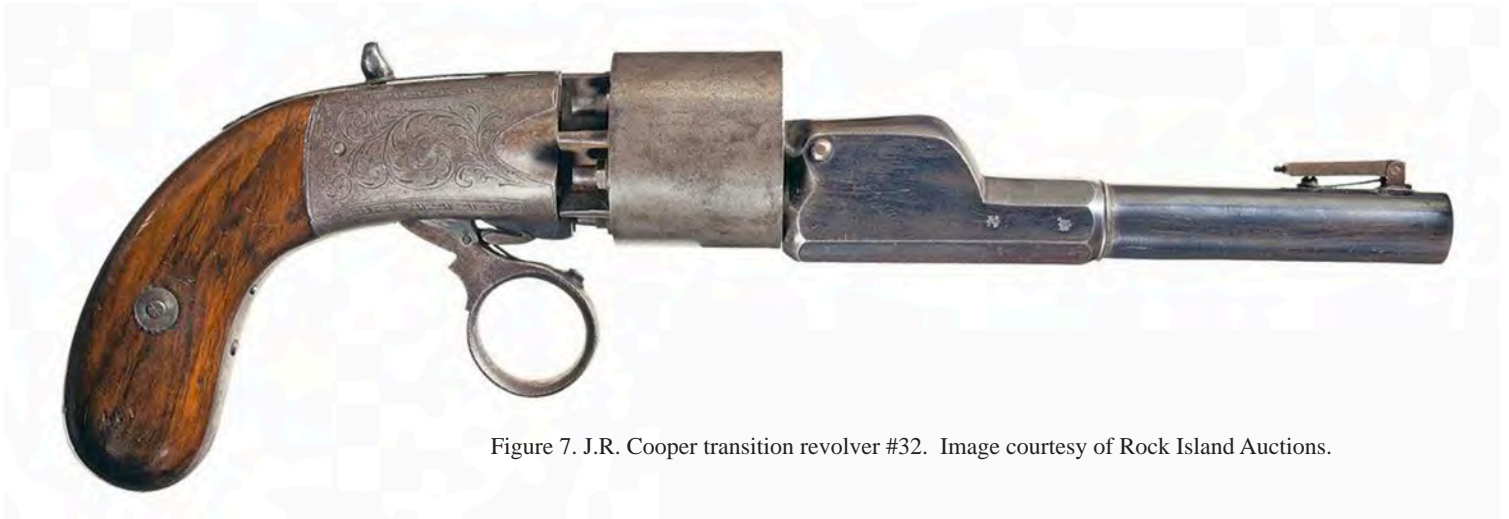


Figure 7. J.R. Cooper transition revolver #32. Image courtesy of Rock Island Auctions.

Conclusions

What once was a one-off has become part of a production run, and my request from almost forty years ago (“I’d like to hear about other pistols like this”) has been answered. Even after publication, writing projects never end. Take nothing for granted.

Thanks to John McLean for his excellent research and voluminous files. Thanks to Jas van Driel for many discussions about pepperboxes and transition revolvers.

As always, I welcome comments and questions at schneiderman615@gmail.com

Endnotes

- ¹ A pepperbox has three or more barrels, grouped around a central axis, that are fired sequentially.
- ² “Transition revolver” names a specific style of percussion pistol made primarily in England between 1850 and 1860. Onto a basic pepperbox grip, frame and mechanism were added a short cylinder and a single barrel. These were not conversions. Most were produced in Birmingham, even if sold in and marked London. Some have a maker’s or retailer’s name, some don’t. Continental examples are less common; the majority of these were made in Liege, Belgium.
“Transition” refers to form and appearance, not time. Pepperboxes, transition revolvers and “modern” style revolvers all co-existed and competed in the 1850s and early 1860s. Note that “transition” is a 20th and 21st century term used by authors, collectors, and the antique arms market, not by the original makers, sellers, buyers and users of these “revolving pistols”. Basically, transition revolvers have a single barrel and no cylinder stop, and the centerline of the cylinder and the frame are in line, giving them their characteristic pepperbox-y look.
- ³ Schneiderman, M. “Joseph Rock Cooper and his underhammer transition revolver.” *Gun Report* 30 (#4):46-48. 1984. The author can supply a copy of the full article on request
- ⁴ Though dispersed, my transition revolver collection has attained immortality, and resides in Chapter 16 of Roy Marcot and Ron Paxton’s book *Colt Brevete Revolvers*, Northwood Heritage Press, Tucson, AZ, 2011, pages 322-328.

