

COLLECTING MANHATTANS IN THE AGE OF THE INTERNET: THINGS I LEARNED WHILE CREATING MANHATTANFIREARMS.COM

by Michael S. Meuwly

Manhattan Fire Arms Manufacturing Company started in business in 1855. They were formed by a group of New York City bankers to compete with Colt revolvers just as the Colt patents for a revolving cylinder gun were running out in 1857 (Figure 1). The company formed a partnership with Thomas Bacon in Norwich, Connecticut. This began the business of manufacturing and selling firearms while they were building a new manufacturing plant in Newark, New Jersey. The new plant was to build their new improved Colt style Navy revolver. From 1855 to 1873, Manhattan produced over 175,000 pistols making them the 4th largest American gunmaker in the Civil War era. Only Colt, Winchester, and Remington made more guns. For an overview of Manhattan Arms, please see Bob Jones' manuscript "Tip-up Tales" in the *American Society of Arms Collectors Bulletin*.¹

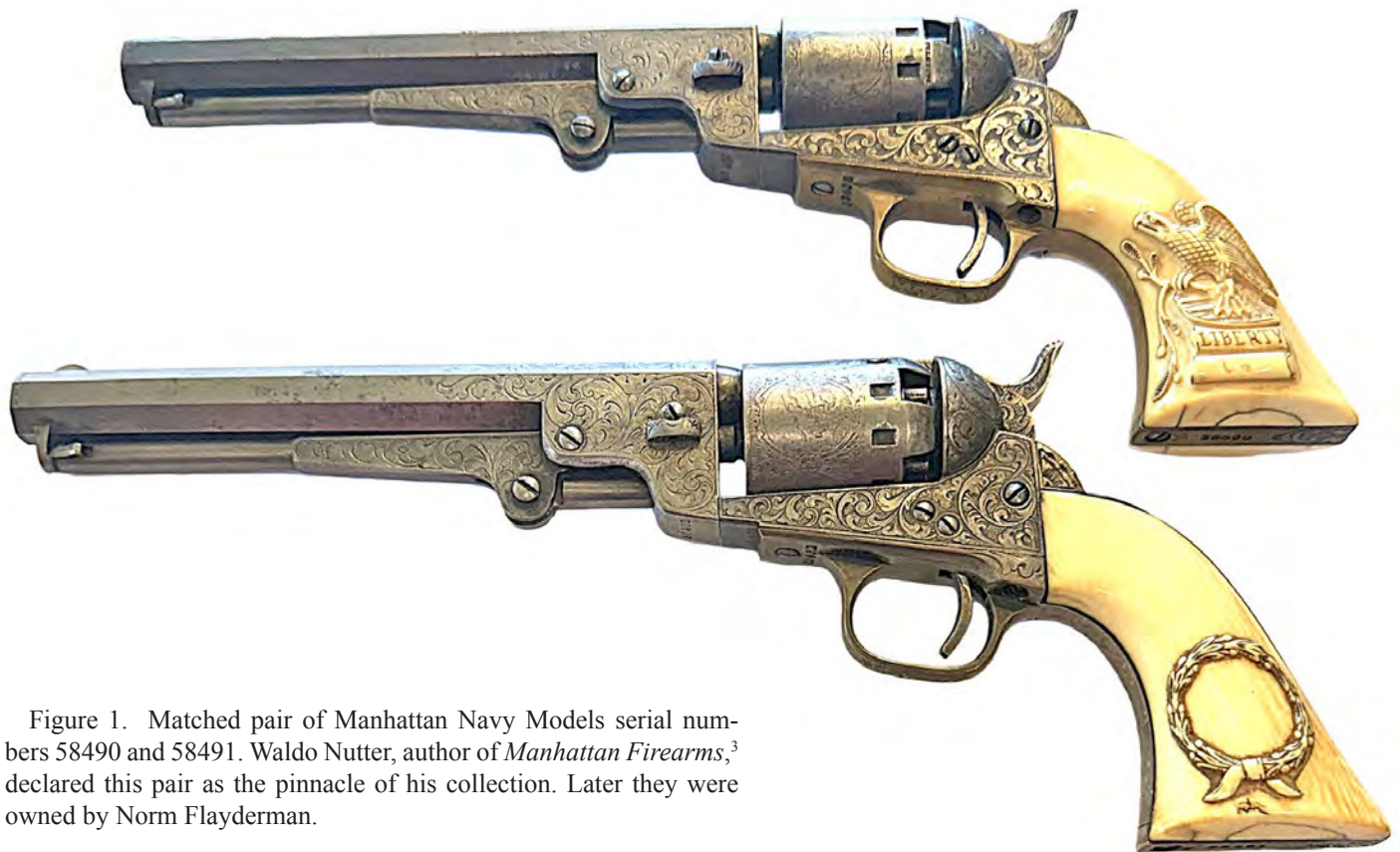


Figure 1. Matched pair of Manhattan Navy Models serial numbers 58490 and 58491. Waldo Nutter, author of *Manhattan Firearms*,³ declared this pair as the pinnacle of his collection. Later they were owned by Norm Flayderman.

There are 3 distinct eras of Manhattan manufacturing:

The first era was in Norwich, CT, they started making copies of pistols like those of Allen Firearms and other gunmakers with already expired patents, such as shotgun hammer single shots (Figure 2), bar hammer single shots, pepperboxes, and later copies of early Smith and Wesson first model .22 pistols. They first entered the revolving cylinder market by designing and then patenting their first revolving pistol, a .31 caliber Pocket model.

The second era began in approximately 1860. The company opened their new factory in Newark, New Jersey. Manhattan discontinued its earlier models and shifted its attention to producing 5-shot, .36 caliber navy models (Figure 3). After the civil war they changed the .36 caliber cylinders to be 6-shot. Production later adapted to meet the rising demand for cartridge guns. They refined their versions of the Smith and Wesson .22 with Manhattan's new

second model cartridge revolvers. Towards the end of the Civil War the firearms market place was a glut of war surplus percussion firearms. Manhattan started the designing and manufacturing of tooling for the general machining industry and added a small boot pistol model named "Hero".

The third era began in 1868, when the tooling business expanded further. Manhattan was reincorporated as the American Standard Tool Company to better reflect its future operations. American Standard Tool continued the production of the .22 cartridge revolvers (Figure 4) and continued the "Hero" brand single shot boot pistol. In 1873 American Standard Tool was sold to the Morse Tool Company and their firearm production ended.

I started collecting the pistols of the Manhattan Fire Arms Company in the 1970's before the age of the internet. I went to my first gun show in 1976 at Ruston, LA and was amazed that I found an



Figure 2. Examples of early production models from Manhattan Firearms. Shotgun hammer pistols (top left), bar hammer pistols (top right), pepper box pistols (bottom left), copies of early Smith and Wesson first model .22 pistols (middle right) and Manhattan Firearms first revolving pistol, a .31 caliber Pocket model (bottom right).

1851 Colt Navy for sale. The dealer wanted \$230.00 for it. I assumed it was the last Colt Navy in existence, and it could be mine! As someone who has read extensively about the Civil War era, this experience was a dream come true. Yet \$230.00 was half of my life savings at the time. So, I left it at the show and sadly went home. When I couldn't sleep that night thinking about the Colt, my new bride told me if I wanted it that bad, I should go buy it. (Later she cursed herself for starting my collecting bug, but I loved her more at that moment than ever!). An hour before the show opened, I was waiting in line. I was scared to death it was already sold. When it was still there, I nearly cried with joy and made my first purchase. A life changing moment for me.

Initially motivated by the ambition to assemble a comprehensive collection of all remaining Colt Navies worldwide, I began my search in earnest. Several months later, I acquired a second Colt Navy at a flea market, resulting in both known examples being in my possession. Progress appeared promising until I encountered Nathan Swayze's book, *'51 Colt Navies*,² where it became evident that the most distinguished Navy collection had already been established. The search persisted, and from time to time, I encountered a remarkable Colt Navy featuring substantial original finish at a reduced price. Initial enthusiasm upon inspection often waned when noticing the barrel was marked "Manhattan Fire Arms." Nevertheless, the firearm remained of excellent quality.



Figure 4. Manhattan Firearms was reincorporated as American Standard Tool and continued the production of the .22 cartridge revolvers and the "Hero" brand single shot boot pistol.

During the same time the Stackpole Publishing Company released an unsold supply of the 1958 edition of *Manhattan Firearms* by Waldo Nutter (Figure 5).³ This definitive guide to Manhattan collecting, presents original, groundbreaking research. I found a copy at Red Jackson's gun shop in Dallas, Texas. A wonderful tale of a group of New York bankers who decided as Colts patents were running out, they could build a better pistol and put Colt out of business.

Norm Flayderman, dealer and author, states in the foreword of the second edition of *Flayderman's Guide to Antique American Firearms*⁴ (Figure 6) that the release of Nutter's book provided collectors with an authoritative resource for collecting Manhattan firearms. Flayderman subsequently included a chapter on Manhattans in his 2nd edition guide, observing that, although Colts and Winchesters had traditionally been popular among collectors, the new reference enabled even those new to the field to assemble noteworthy collections of Manhattan firearms. It appeared that Norm was addressing me personally, suggesting that I could become the distinguished Manhattan collector.

My collecting Manhattans in rural America involved visiting local gun shows, flea markets, sporting goods stores, and pawn shops. In the 1980s, the discovery of the Shotgun News newsletter, which listed guns for sale nationally, expanded my access to antique firearms. Collectors at the time commonly read each issue from cover to cover upon arrival.

With the rise of the internet, it became possible to search for guns online. The launch of eBay in 1995 marked a turning point for Manhattan collectors. eBay is widely regarded as the first significant online shopping platform. Individuals who had inherited antique guns from their families began listing their Manhattan pistols for sale online, rather than attempting to sell them locally. Manhattans that had been sitting in closets for a hundred years came to light. All the early great buys of my collecting career were purchased on eBay in the next few years. My collection grew in leaps and bounds. Then in 1999 the San Francisco owners of eBay decided that the "woke" Beanie Baby buying users of eBay were horrified that eBay was selling guns. The sales of firearms on eBay were banned, and my golden age came to an end. Websites that focused on firearms, began to emerge. Gunaction.com was established in 1998, Gunbroker.com followed in 1999, and Gunsinternational.com was founded in 2006. These and similar internet sites made gun collecting accessible to millions of Americans in rural regions, where antique firearms had once been hard to find.

MANHATTAN FIREARMS

By
Waldo E. Nutter



THE STACKPOLE COMPANY
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

American Society of Arms Collectors

THE AMERICAN SOCIETY OF ARMS COLLECTORS, through its Reviewing Staff, takes pride in sponsoring this book and in recommending it as a standard work of reference in the field of Manhattan Firearms history.

HERSCHEL C. LOGAN
President

Reviewing Staff
SAMUEL E. SMITH
THOMAS J. MCHUGH

Figure 5. The book *Manhattan Firearms* by Waldo Nutter³ and the support letter from the American Society of Arms Collectors.

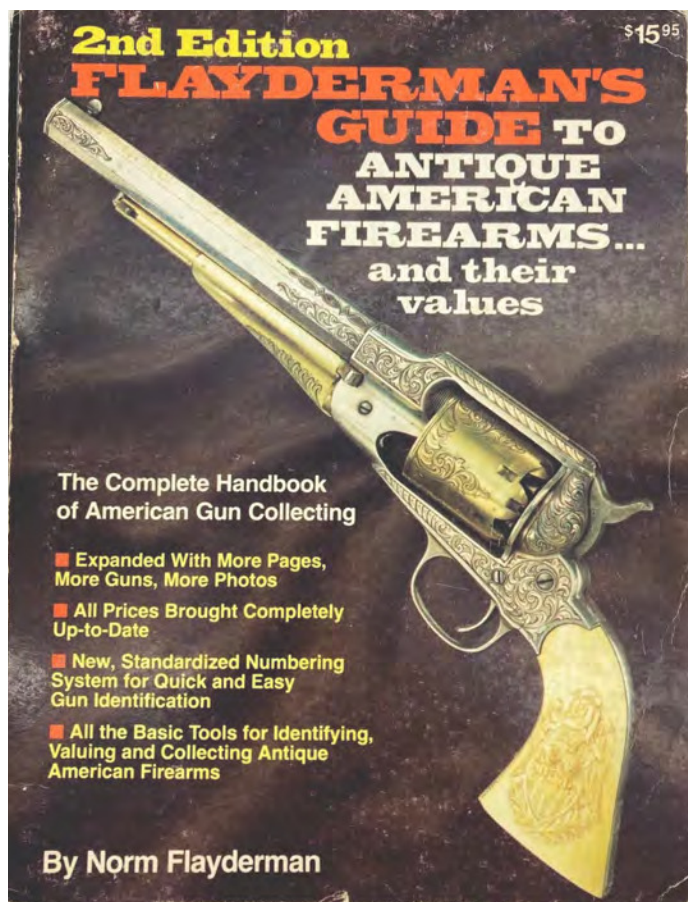


Figure 6. The reference book by Norm Flayderman⁴ where a chapter on Manhattan Firearms citing the recent book by Waldo Nutter.

Online access revolutionized global auctions. Previously, major gun auction houses sold mainly to gun dealers at live city events, who then resold items in shops and at gun shows. With auctions now accessible online in real time, collectors could purchase guns directly from auctions without going through middleman dealers. Currently, weekly gun auctions are held internationally and are accessible to the public. With the development of new Internet search engines, it became possible to locate Manhattans listed in auctions worldwide. My preferred auction search sites are Invaluable.com, (established 1999), Proxibid.com (established in 2001) and LiveAuctioneers.com (established in 2002).

One phenomenon that I started to notice in the 1990's was the early formation of the "Internet Police" for antique firearms. Those are the people (I was guilty) who would read internet ads on eBay and later Gunbroker.com and others looking for mistakes in the listings. They write self-righteous emails explaining everything they got wrong, like Manhatt "an" is not spelled Manhatt "en"! I sometimes proofread ads on eBay and Gunbroker.com for a friend. When I pointed out possible mistakes, he says don't worry the "Internet Police" will correct him with the right information. They would send him links to information about his gun, and other historical information. So let the public do all the work!

This led to my creation of Manhattanfirearms.com. At a gun show in 1998, I started a discussion about maybe I should start a vanity website on Manhattans. I could post information about Manhattans and wait for the "Internet Police" to arrive and correct everything I thought I knew. Also ask people to send me photos of their Manhattans for me to study. Mainly I wanted to know if

anyone else was collecting Manhattans.

What did I learn about Manhattan collectors? Most Manhattan owners collect vertically. They have a Manhattan pepperbox as part of pepperbox collection, a Manhattan .22 spur trigger as part of a .22 collection, or a .36 caliber Manhattan Navy model as part of a collection Civil War era revolvers. Most owners report that they acquired it through family inheritance. I have met maybe a scant handful of serious collectors who collect horizontally all models of Manhattans. If you collected one of each of the models and every barrel length of each model, you would need to have around 75+ pistols.

For over 25 years, I have corresponded with individuals worldwide through my website, Manhattanfirearms.com. I invite everyone who contacts my site to submit photographs of their pistols. I claim to have seen more Manhattans than anyone who did not actually work in the Manhattan factory. This has provided me with perspectives that were not available to Waldo Nutter at the time he authored his book. Owing to the internet age, I have encountered significantly more pistols than Nutter would have seen. This broader exposure has resulted in four distinct observations that differ from those presented by Nutter in his book *Manhattan Firearms*.³

Observation #1: Nutter noted that some early bar hammer models appeared to share identical serial numbers, suggesting the possibility that these guns had batch numbers which restarted at serial number 1. Based on my observations, the single shot bar hammer models were produced in two versions each with serial numbers starting at #1: a small frame (.31 caliber) and a large frame (.36 caliber). While Nutter stated that bar hammers exist with matching serial numbers, this may be accounted for by the presence of both small and large frames. There is no evidence indicating that batch numbers were used (Figure 7).



Figure 7. A small frame and large frame Manhattan bar hammer with the same serial number 302 showing that the two different frame sizes had their own serial number range.

Observation #2: Nutter said that the longest barrel length on a bar hammer model was 4 inches. I have observed both 5-inch and 6-inch barrels. Bar hammer serial numbers 198 and 207 are both 6-inch barrels (Figure 8).



Figure 8. Bar hammer pistols with 6-inch barrels.

Observation #3: Nutter surmised that batch numbers also might be true for the early .31 caliber pocket revolver models. He claimed there were two models of the .31 Pocket pistol, the first model with a 5-shot cylinder, the second model with a 6-shot cylinder. Early on I found multiple cases in auction records of a 5-shot pocket model with a 4-inch barrel and later the same serial number 5-shot pocket model with a 6-inch barrel. Nutter allowed some small variation in the cylinders as some had 5 cylinder notches instead of the standard 10 notches. Having seen many more pocket models than Nutter, I have a different conclusion.

I believe there are three variations of Pockets the first model is a 5-shot cylinder, 5- notch model mostly with no engraved cylinder

scene. These are serial numbered from sn#1 to about sn# 600. The second model is the 5-shot cylinder, with the new patented 10 safety notches that all have a roll-engraved cylinder. These are serial numbers from sn# 1 to around sn# 1,000. Then the third model are the 6-shot cylinders, 12-notch model that are serial numbered from around sn# 1,000 to Sn# 4,000+ (Figure 9).

Observation #4: Nutter notes that some Manhattan Pocket .31 models were marked with the London Pistol Company name on the barrel. (Figure 10). He found these pistols often had minor manufacturing flaws, suggesting they were sold as "second quality" guns under this label. I differ in this conclusion.

In *Manhattan Firearms*,³ Waldo Nutter demonstrates that Thomas Bacon was involved in the sale of firearm components, rather than fully assembled weapons. A price list obtained from court records shows prices for barrels he made (Figure 10). When Manhattan relocated from Norwich to the Newark facility, production of pocket models ceased; however, Bacon continued manufacturing Pocket models. My family has been engaged in the machine parts manufacturing industry for five generations. Drawing upon my experience, it is reasonable to conclude that Thomas Bacon, as the manufacturer of the components, would have possessed the jigs and fixtures required for producing the pocket models. Bacon likely had ownership of the patterns used for parts derived from castings, as well as the rolled-cylinder scene dies. Manhattan would not have acquired any defective parts from Bacon; such items would have been retained as scrap inventory by the manufacturer. Casting companies commonly manufacture quantities exceeding



Figure 9. There are three distinct Manhattan Pocket Models. The 5-notch cylinder model (top), the 10-notch cylinder model (middle) and the 12-cylinder model (bottom).



Figure 10. London Pistol Company marked Pocket Model (top left), barrel address (top right) and price list for Manhattan barrels showing Thomas Bacon was under contract as a parts manufacturer for Manhattan. (Bottom).

the original order by up to 10%, requiring buyers to purchase these additional units. This standard practice is implemented to guarantee sufficient inventory should defective items arise. Bacon was held accountable for both the nonconforming components and the excess castings produced.

It can be reasonably concluded that following Manhattan's move to Newark, Bacon assembled remaining spare parts into complete firearms. As a result, some of the finished pistols may have comprised residual components from all three pocket models. Subsequently, Bacon designated all the pistols under the London Pistol Company name, thereby obscuring their origin. After these units were sold, further pistols with cylinder scenes identical to those on the Manhattan models were manufactured and distributed under the Bacon brand.

Questions asked from Manhattanfirearms.com visitors.

What is my Manhattan worth?

Antique gun dealers usually base Manhattan prices on their purchase costs, resulting in widely varied asking prices. General gun show pricing I have seen is that Manhattan Navies bring about 60% of that of a Colt Navy (plus three-year rise time). As an example, when a medium condition Colt Navy model had an average price of \$1,000, an equal conditioned Manhattan was \$600. When asking price on Colt Navies suddenly jumped to \$1,500, then over the next 3-year period Manhattans slowly inched up to \$900.



NEWARK FIRE HORROR OF NOVEMBER 26, 1910.

The burning of the Glass factory building in High street, Newark, N. J. This fire, which was caused by the accidental upsetting of a can of gasoline, cost twenty-five young women employed in the top story their lives and sent many others to the hospital. Nobody was to blame. The "law" had been complied with.

Figure 11. News article showing the tragic burning of the original Manhattan Firearms building in Newark.

What happened with the Civil War military sales and contracts?

Manhattan was the largest firearms manufacturer that did not have a government contract during the Civil War. At the outset of the war, it was commonly believed the conflict would last approximately six months. By not pursuing government contracts, Manhattan aimed to focus on the civilian market and sales to state militias. There were erroneous reports that Manhattan submitted 36 revolvers

for Ordnance trials. But this undoubtedly came from an incident where Manhattan claimed damages from the U.S. Government for the confiscation of 36 .22 caliber (26 blued and 10 plated) revolvers and 5000 .22 caliber cartridges that were commandeered by the governor of Indiana as war contraband. Manhattan was later awarded a government contract payment of \$423.80 in compensation.⁵

What happened to the Manhattan manufacturing plant?

The factory became the site of one of the worst industrial disasters in the country. A fire in 1910 Killed 26 garment workers (20 died by jumping from the top floor) in the old Manhattan factory at the corner of Orange and High Streets in Newark (Figure 11).

What is the best Manhattan find from your website?

I purchased an engraved nickel-plated Navy model inscribed "H.A. McCaleb Col USA" at the Tulsa Gun Show in 2010 (Figure 12). I researched McCaleb, who has a fascinating war record, and I wrote an article on McCaleb for my website. McCaleb was the color sergeant of the 11th Illinois Infantry carrying the battle flag at the battle of Fort Donaldson, he took a spent ammo round to the forehead, knocking him out. When he came to, he picked up the

flag and ran to catch up with the troops. He was the first man into the fort and planted the flag. He was proclaimed a hero and promoted to 2nd Lieutenant on the spot by the 11th Illinois Infantry. Later in the war, he was promoted to Lt. Colonel in command of the 2nd Mississippi Heavy Artillery (African Descent). A bounty was put on his head by the Louisiana legislature for making captured Louisiana confederate prisoners dig latrines for his colored troops at Natchez, MS.

I received an email in 2022 from a man thanking me for my article on McCaleb as he owned the exact same gun. WHAT THE HECK! I wrote back asking him for pictures! (Figure 13). My McCaleb pistol is serial number 40496, his pistol was serial number 40495, both part of a matched pair. His gun was found hidden in a wall of a home in Los Angeles, CA by his great grandfather. His gun was in his family for close to 100 years and not for sale. After many more conversations I convinced him that these two guns were of historic importance and should be reunited. I then offered to sell his family my McCaleb gun or buy his. He talked it over with his family and they agreed the two guns needed to be together and sold me their family's Manhattan. Without the internet these two guns would never have been reunited.



Figure 12. Inscribed Manhattan Navy backstrap to "H.A. McCaleb Col U.S.A. (top), Manhattan Navy Model serial number 40496 belonging to Col. McCaleb (lower left) and a photo of Col. McCaleb (lower right).



Figure 13. McCaleb inscribed matched pair of Manhattan Navy Models serial numbers 40495 and 40496 (upper), comparison of both McCaleb inscriptions (lower right), and serial numbers on the frames of the matched pair (lower left).

What do I need to know to collect Manhattans?

1. Obtain a copy of *Manhattan Firearms* by Waldo Nutter³ and *Flayderman's Guide to Antique American Firearms* by Norm Flayderman.⁴ These resources provide comprehensive information on the subject.

2. Factory engraving is standard for most Pocket models, pepper-boxes, single shots (except "Hero models") and .22 models and are not rare.



Figure 14. Manhattan produced a set of 100 highly embellished Navy Models serial numbered 1 to 99 for sale for presentation to returning Civil War veterans. They were manufactured near the end of the Civil War, all being series IV Navy Models. Shown is serial number 49 fully engraved and with carved ivory grips showing a bust of “Lady Columbia”.

3. Factory-engraved Manhattan Navy models are uncommon, and examples featuring upgraded ivory grips are particularly rare. The majority of engraved Manhattan Navies were engraved by the same New York City artisans responsible for engraving Colts and other firearms (Figure 14).
4. Based on my observations, rolled engraved cylinder scenes exhibit significantly greater depth than those found on Colt models. Among the firearms I have examined, approximately 90% of Navy models retain a portion of their cylinder scene.
5. The silver-plated thickness on Navy model back straps is significantly greater compared to Colt Navy models. Approximately half of the firearms observed retained well-preserved silver plating.

6. The rarest Manhattan collectible is anything “printed” as it is almost non-existent. In 50 years of collecting, I have found one letter head (Figure 15), a few Manhattan .22 pistol boxes, a .36 caliber ammunition packet, and only a photo of a .22 box of cartridges.

Manhattans are the Rodney Dangerfield (“I get no respect”) of Collecting (Figure 16)

I get a lot of “funny” comments about why I collect Manhattans instead of “real” guns. After I won an award for my display of my Manhattan collection at the ASAC meeting in 2024 Denton, TX., it was remarked to me by a fellow ASAC member that, “you probably have the finest collection of Manhattans in the world...it must make the other 2 collectors jealous”. LOL, sad but true. The

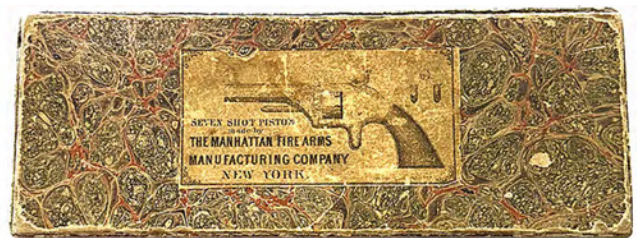
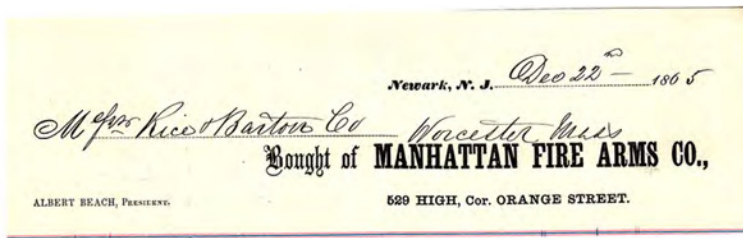


Figure 15. Manhattan Fire Arms company letterhead (upper left); .22 caliber pistol box (top right); a .36 caliber ammunition box (lower left); and image of a .22 cartridge box (lower right).

MAJOR ALFRED MORDECAI, THE SHARPS CARBINE AND ITS TEST AND TRIALS

by Edward W. Marron, Jr.



Figure 1. Sharps Model 1851 - Ordnance Issued – serial number 191.

“At the appointed time, June 14th, 1819, I went up the Hudson in a steamboat, of which were not more than two or three, perhaps, then running and was put on shore at West Point from a rowboat attached to the steamer by a line as was the customary manner of making all the principal landings. Having reported myself to Major Thayer was soon quartered with several of my classmates in a room in the old North Barracks”¹

His arrival at West Point marked the beginning of Alfred Mordecai’s military career. Born January 3, 1804, in Warrenton, North Carolina, Mordecai was educated in a school founded by his father Jacob. His early education served him well. He excelled in mathematics. A brilliant student, Mordecai graduated from West Point in 1823 at the head of his class (Figure 2). While at West Point, he served as an assistant professor of natural and experimental philosophy (physics and applied mechanics) from 1823 to 1824 and as the Academy’s assistant professor of engineering in 1824 and 1825.² Mordecai’s intellect, love of mathematics, and intellectual honesty defined his military career.

In 1825, Mordecai was assigned to oversee the construction of military fortifications in Norfolk, Virginia. Promoted to Captain of Ordnance on May 30, 1832, he later commanded the Washington Arsenal (Figure 3) and then the Frankford Arsenal. In 1842, he was named Assistant to the Chief of Ordnance in Washington. From 1839 to 1860, he served on the Ordnance Department’s Ordnance Board, including the first board to test a Sharps rifle. For his meritorious service commanding the Washington Arsenal during the Mexican American War, he was brevetted major in 1848, the same year Christian Sharps patented his breech-loading rifle.³

Alfred Mordecai wrote about military technology extensively. In the *“Military Commission to Europe in 1855 and 1856: Report of Major Alfred Mordecai, of the Ordnance Department”*, he voiced serious reservations about adopting breech-loading firearms for military service.⁴ He took a similar view in *“Report on the Art of War in Europe in 1854, 1855, and 1856”*⁵, commonly known as the Delafield Report, written by Major Richard Delafield with Mordecai as co-author. Even so, the report acknowledged that



Figure 2. Alfred Mordecai 1804-1887 (left) as a West Point cadet (right).

general public asks “what is your Collection worth”? General collectors ask, “why collect Manhattans instead of Colts”? Dedicated collectors such as in the ASAC asked the best question “How long did it take to find all these Manhattans” recognizing the long hours needed to amass any great collection.



Figure 16. Rodney Dangerfield, a comedian whose standard catchphrase was “I don’t get no respect”.

Best thing that remains on my bucket list. Duck hunting! (Figure 17)



Figure 17. U.S. federal duck hunting stamp.

An article from a diary by J.C. Williams.⁶

An incident or two which happened while out, is worthy of note here. Companies B and G, and part of Company K, were ordered to the extreme left of the line, under the command of Lieut. Blakely of Company B., We had not been there a great while before the report of two guns were heard, the signal of the approach of the enemy. Lieut. Blakely ordered us to form in line immediately, and prepare to give the enemy a warm reception, inn case he did indeed appear. But it proved to be some hunters who had carelessly discharged their pieces near the lines. I think Elias Baker, of company B, will make the best shot of any man in the regiment. A wild duck came flying along and alighted in the stream near by where the reserve was stationed. Two of the boys fired their pieces at it, scaring it up without hurting it. But Baker, carrying his "Manhattan" revolver from his pocket, shot the duck through the breast while at a considerable height in the air.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Adams, Bob “Tip-up Tales”. *American Society of Arms Collectors Bulletin*, 127:91-98. 2023.
- ² Swayze, Nathan L. *'51 Colt Navies*. Gun Room Press, 1967
- ³ Nutter, Waldo. *Manhattan Firearms*. Stackpole, 1957.
- ⁴ Flayderman, Norm *Flayderman's Guide to Antique American Firearms...and their values (second Edition)*. Northfield, IL, DBI Books, 1980
- ⁵ Mowbray, Stuart C. and Heroux, Jennifer (editors) *Civil War Arms Makers and their Contracts*. Lincoln, RI, Andrew Mowbray Publishers, 1998
- ⁶ Williams, J. C. *Life in Camp*. Claremont, NH. Claremont Manufacturing Co. 1864

