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Colt's 1861 Navy

David Stroud



The featured revolver in this article is a 7½-inch round-barrel six-shot .36 caliber with round, non-rebated cylinder and roll engraved with W. L. Ormsby's scene of the Texas Navy battling a Mexican fleet. It has the creeping-style loading lever; one-piece, varnished, walnut grips with brass, silver-plated grip straps; casehardened frame; hammer and loading lever with the remainder blued. The top of the barrel, reading left from near the front sight, is stamped "ADDRESS COL. SAML COLT NEW-YORK U.S. AMERICA." The left side of the frame is stamped "COLTS" over "PATENT," with the left shoulder of the brass trigger guard marked "36 cal."

As with all of the revolvers of the Colt Patented Fire Arms Manufacturing Company of Hartford, Connecticut, '61 Navies were available with additional features, at extra charge. These elements included hand engraving, inscriptions, fancy grips, a non-engraved fluted cylinders, or an extra screw for an accompanying shoulder stock.¹

The New Navies were manufactured from 1861 until 1873 and serial numbered 1-38,843. Like all Colt percussion revolvers, the serial numbers are stamped on the major parts and written in black ink on the grip's backstrap groove, which keeps the numbers hidden from view by the backstrap. This helps protect them from the elements, and they are often visible once the grips are removed. The cylinder and loading lever often have only the last four numbers.

¹ Norm Flayderman, *Flayderman's Guide to Antique American Firearms and Their Values*, 8th Edition (Iola: Krause Publications, 2001), 81. Only about one hundred fluted-cylinder Round Barrel Navies were manufactured (serial numbered 1-100). The same number applies to the shoulder-stocked '61 Navies, but their serial numbers are not sequential, being in the 11,000 and 14,000 range.



The Texas Ranger Hall of Fame and Museum has several 1861 Navies on display, and one engraved with carved ivory grips features an eagle. At first glance, the Navies appear to be 1860 Armies, and that is what Sam Colt intended when he began production of the New Model Belt Pistol, also marketed as the New Model Navy Pistol.² The New Navy differed from the 1851 Old Navy with its sleek 1860 Army appearance (*Dispatch 6, Spring 2002*) with a round barrel, creeping-loading lever, and a roll-engraved Ormsby's Texas Navy battle scene on the non-rebated round cylinder. It fires .36 caliber bullets with a 7½-inch barrel combination that had proven extremely successful with Colt's 1851 Navy (*Dispatch #4 Summer 2001*). Because the New Navy entered the market in 1861, most twentieth century antique arms dealers and collectors refer to it as the 1861 Navy while others describe it as a Round Barrel Navy.³

Because the relatively small number of New Navies produced between 1861 and 1873 was 38,843, the Round Barrel Navies have been considered unpopular by a few modern-day historians. I respectfully disagree that unpopularity was the reason for the small output. If the sole determination of a weapon's status with that era's gun purchasers was the number produced, the 1,100 Walker Colts were roughly thirty-five times less popular than '61 Navies, and the '61 Navies were about thirty-five times more popular than Colt Walkers. The Colt Paterson's total production of its five models is approximately 2,850 or about thirteen times less popular than the '61 Navy.⁴ Needless to say, this is not the case.

The 1861 Navy "was one of Colt's finest percussion handguns"⁵ and "one of the most graceful styled of all Colt revolvers."⁶ So why were so few produced?

Entering production in 1861, the New Navy .36 caliber had to compete with the extremely popular 1851 Navy, which actually began production in 1850 and had an eleven-year head start on its younger brother. In fact, there were already 93,000 '51 Navies sold or waiting in arms dealers' display cases priced at \$16.00 to \$19.75 while the New Navies were offered for \$25.00.⁷

As the Civil War began, Lincoln called for 75,000 volunteers to serve the Union for ninety days, and in July, he requested 300,000 more to serve three years. Although the '61 Navy went into production during this time, the Federal army purchased thousands of .44 caliber Armies that had been placed in production the year before. In fact, the Army acquired only 2,056 New Navies while buying 127,157 New Armies during the four-year war.⁸ The U.S. Navy, which preferred .36 calibers, remained much smaller than the Army during the war and had previously purchased

2 Charles T. Haven and Frank A. Belden, *A History of the Colt Revolver and Other Arms Made by Colt's Patent Fire Arms Manufacturing Company from 1836 to 1940* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1940), 106.

3 Haven and Belden, 100. The '61 Navy and '62 Police Pocket Pistol in Navy caliber both began production in early 1861.

4 Flayderman, 69-70.

5 John McAulay, *Civil War Pistols: A survey of the Handguns of the American Civil War* (Lincoln: Andrew Mowbray Inc, 1992), 39.

6 R. L. Wilson, *Colt: An American Legend* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1985), 101.

7 Wilson, 36. These prices are estimated, based on the price Colt charged the U.S. government. The U.S. Navy purchased the last 850 New Model Navies at \$15.00 each in 1862.8 Wilson, 36.

8 Wilson, 36.



16,962 Colt 1851 Navies by November 3, 1859. During the four years of war, the Navy purchased only 3,370 New Model Navies, with their last order filled in 1862.⁹

The New Model Navy's \$25.00 price was much greater than that of the Remington and Whitney Navy Revolvers purchased by the Navy at \$12.00 each.¹⁰ One of the reasons for the higher price was Colt's provision for his workers of housing and clean, well-ventilated workplaces. He also paid them "the highest pay in the country for the class of work they did."¹¹

Without the government, Colt had to look to the open market for selling his New Navies to civilians, Union officers who were required to provide their own sidearms, and enlisted men who wanted a backup weapon. The dealers who sold revolvers to the public apparently found that their customers preferred less expensive Old Navy (8,117) rather than its pricier younger brother (2,707).¹² Yet these figures don't equal the 25,000 New Model Navies produced before the war ended in April 1865.¹³ Therefore, an unknown number of those revolvers must have been ordered directly from the factory, sold to walk-ins who walked out with one or more, or carried home by Colt employees over the years without paying. Also factored in should be the number of unsold New Navies still at the factory when the guns fell silent.

The combination of a disastrous 1864 fire at the East Armory section of the Colt manufacturing plant, the end of the Civil War in 1865, and the introduction and ultimate success of metallic cartridge firearms provided reasons for lower production. The fire destroyed much of the revolver's production line and meant fewer New Navies for the public to purchase. When the Civil War ended, so did military contracts. This provided a vast surplus of handguns as the government sold thousands of excessive revolvers to the public for nickels on the dollar. Also, Union enlisted men were allowed to buy their revolvers to take home with them.¹⁴

I believe the most important reason for the relatively few 1861 Navies produced was the health of Sam Colt when the New Navy entered the marketplace. He was, in my opinion, the king of marketing and was preparing to build another armory "of about equal extent with the one I have erected in the South Meadow."¹⁵ Overwork proved to be perhaps the greatest factor in his rapid health decline. From his earliest days marketing the Paterson until Christmas 1861, Sam rarely slowed down. After his daughter Elizabeth passed away before celebrating her second birthday, Colt was unable to keep up the "false front of activity, not to worry his wife."¹⁶ Also, during the summer of 1861, Sam continued fighting gout and rheumatic fever, and the fever seemed

9 McAulay, 31, 42.

10 McAulay, 42.

11 Haven and Belden, 92.

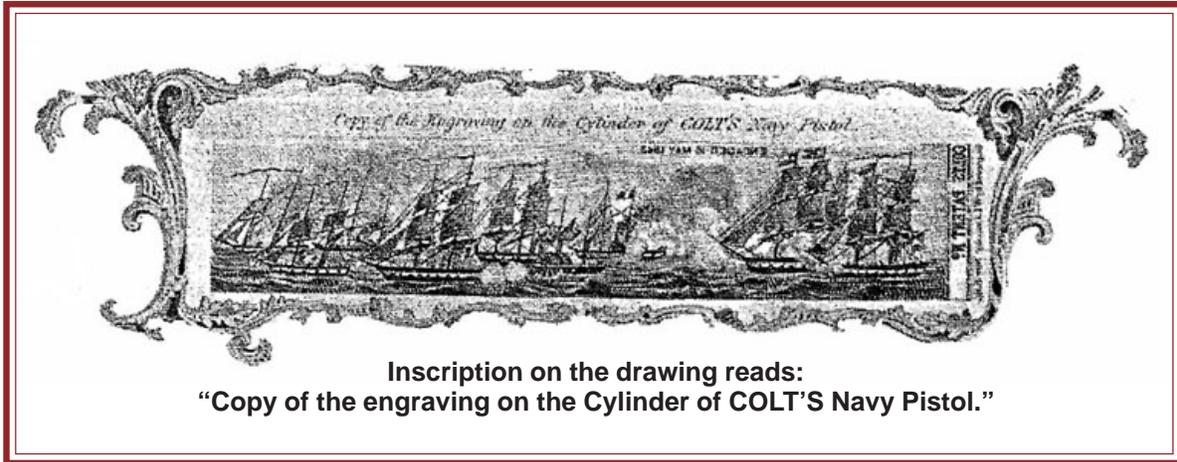
12 Haven and Belden, 36.

13 Because General Robert E. Lee surrendered his Army of Northern Virginia on April 19, 1865, that date is generally recognized as the official end of the Civil War. Also, President Lincoln held his last cabinet meeting and General Grant attended to advice on government contracts cancelations on April 14 of that year.

14 Wilson, 103; McAulay, 43. Colt Dragoons were sold for as little as ten cents.

15 Martin Rywell, *Samuel Colt: A Man and an Epoch* (Harriman: Pioneer Press, 1955), 153.

16 Rywell, 153.



responsible for sending the forty-seven-year-old inventor to bed during Christmas.¹⁷ Then, on January 4, 1862, Sam spoke for the last time. “It is all over now,” he said, and then he died.¹⁸ Only about 4,500 of the New Navies had been shipped by then. That was less than half the number of his .36 caliber New Model Police Pistol,¹⁹ also known as the 1862 Police and Pocket Navy,²⁰ which had been introduced along with the New Navy.

After Sam died, Elisha K. Root became president of Colt Firearms and guided it through the war before he died on July 5, 1865. He had worked for Colt since 1849 and had helped him design the side-hammer 1855 Root revolver. This gun helped illustrate that Root’s “ingenuity and mechanical skills and invention had been second only to Colt.”²¹ Richard W. H. Jarvis, Sam’s brother-in-law, had served as vice president since 1865, and he picked up the reins to direct the firearms company through the end of the percussion era into the 20th century. He retired in 1901.²² Root and Jarvis were good, but they couldn’t replace Sam when it came to marketing.

Dispatch 28 (Spring 2009) contains an article featuring a mysterious Richard-Mason converted 1860 Army. It states that Colt Firearms continued simultaneous production of percussion revolvers, percussions converted to fire metallic cartridge, and original metallic cartridge firing revolvers from 1868 to 1873. The 1861 Navies were included, as 2,200 of the .36 caliber Round Barrel Navies were converted from percussion revolvers to fire .38 metallic. Until 1873, an additional 3,300 were assembled from leftover parts for the gun-buying public²³ specifically to fire .38 caliber cartridges

17 Bern Keating, *The Flamboyant Mr. Colt and His Deadly Six-Shooter* (Garden City: Doubleday and Company Inc., 1978), 200.

18 Keating, 200.

19 Haven and Belden, 107.

20 Wilson, 103.

21 Haven and Belden, 93.

22 Haven and Belden, XI.

23 Wilson, 163, 365.



(serial numbered 1-3300 and not considered conversions)²⁴ A number of percussion Round Barrels converted outside of the factory have percussion serial numbers but no patent dates stamped on the frame's left side. Between 1873 and 1876, the U.S. Navy stepped in and purchased 1,500 Round Barrel Navies that were converted from .36 caliber percussion to the .38 caliber metallic cartridge.²⁵

After the Civil War, the price for a New Model Navy was reduced to \$15.00 for a plain model and \$20.00 for engraved.²⁶ Although these prices appear extremely low today, \$18.00 for a plain 1851 Navy in 1860 would have been approximately \$600.00 in 1998.²⁷ In New York City, Schuyler, Hartley, and Graham was the "the largest supplier of firearms to the frontier," according to the shipping records, and not one 1861 Navy was shipped to Texas between 1868 and 1886.²⁸

So how did Colt's New Model Navies get to Texas and into the hands of Lone Star citizens and Texas Rangers? More than twenty years ago, an elderly lady asked me to identify and clean the gun her Confederate soldier grandfather had brought home to Texas from the Civil War. He had been a member of an East Texas Regiment that served in the Army of Tennessee, and the revolver he returned with was an 1861 Navy Colt. I identified it for her, explaining that her grandfather had either captured it from a Union Soldier or picked it up on a battlefield after the Federals retreated. I feel sure the lady's grandfather wasn't the only Confederate soldier to return or move to the Lone Star State after that war with a Colt Round Barrel Navy in his belt or holster.

The Schuyler, Hartley, and Graham Company was only one supplier of weapons to the Lone Star State. Colt also shipped arms directly to dealers in Texas, according to historical letters available from the Colt archives. For example, Schuyler, Hartley, and Graham listed thirty-two New Model Army percussion revolvers sent to Texas between 1868 and 1886, but not a single 1860 Army Conversion. However, a Louis D. Nimscke-engraved Colt 1860 Conversion was shipped to Wexel, De Gress, and Company, which had locations in Brownsville, San Antonio, and towns along the Texas-Mexico border during the Old West era.²⁹ Colt's archives reveal that the company received many shipments of their firearms.³⁰ Additionally, the February 25, 1866, *Flake's Daily Bulletin* in Galveston advertised that R. Jones had received a large lot of all kinds of fancy and plain pistols.³¹ Certainly a few of that large lot were standard (plain) and engraved Colts with expensive (fancy) grips. When Norton & Deutz ran their advertisement in the *San Antonio Herald* on October 21, 1866, they left no doubt in the readers' minds that they sold Colt's Patent Revolving Pistols.³² In

24 R. Bruce McDowell, *A Study of Colt Conversions and Other Percussion Revolvers* (Iola: Krause Publications, 1997), 246.

25 McAulay, 43.

26 Herbert G. Houze, *Colt Presentations: From the Factory Ledgers 1856-1869* (Lincoln: Andrew Mowbrary Inc., 2003), 11.

27 Houze, 16.

28 Herbert G. Houze, *Arming the West: A Fresh Look at the Guns That Were Actually Carried on the Frontier* (Woonsocket: Mowbrary Publishing, 2008), 111.

29 Chris Hirsch, *The Texas Gun Trade: A Guide to the Guns Made or Sold in the Lone Star State, 1780-1899* (Woonsocket: Andrew Mowbrary Inc., 2008), 183-184.

30 Hirsch, 183-184.

31 Hirsch, 93.

32 Hirsch, 125. Henry Norton was the "sole agent for Colt's guns." His business was listed as H. Norton and Bro. in 1859-1866; Norton and Deutz in 1867-1874.

San Antonio, Charles Hummel operated a gun business from antebellum Texas through the 1880s. He advertised in the September 11, 1851, *San Antonio Ledger* that he had a lot of Colt's Navy Pistols.³³ Because he sold Colt Naives before the war, he very likely continued selling both 1851 and 1861 Navies after the conflict ended.

There is no doubt that 1861 Navy Colts were available in Texas during the cattle-drive and gun-fighting era of Texas Ranger history. Sam Houston's descendants donated an 1861 Navy that was manufactured in early 1865 to the Sam Houston Memorial Museum in Huntsville.³⁴ The date is too late for Sam Houston Jr. of the 2nd Texas



Colt 1861 Navy, left side

Infantry to have brought it home from the Battle of Shiloh (April 12-13, 1862), where he was severely wounded and captured before returning home in September 1862.³⁵ It was in plenty of time, however, for him to have acquired it after the war or for his younger brother, thirteen-year-old Temple, to have carried it a cattle drive in 1873 to Great Bend, Kansas.³⁶

As mentioned in the **Dispatch 29** article featuring Major John B. Jones's Manhattan Navy revolver, documenting Texas Ranger ownership of 19th century weapons is exceedingly rare. Few were inscribed with either the Ranger's name or a presentation. Even the odds of a Colt historical letter documenting Texas Ranger ownership is one in several hundred thousand at best. That chance decreases in the case of 1861 Navies because the 1864 fire at the Amory not only destroyed much of the factory's weapon-production equipment but also many shipping documents as well. Consequently, letters documenting Round Barrel Navies are available for serial numbers 1-12,000 only.³⁷

The fundamentals of this column have always been to inform readers of the types of weapons produced during a certain historical era that were available for Texas Rangers to use. Whenever possible, the goal is to feature weapons with known Rangers association. From their earliest days to the present, Texas Rangers have used the best weapons available, and during most of the 19th and 20th centuries, the best handgun was a Colt. The 1861 Round Barrel Navy was no exception.



Photos courtesy of David Stroud.

33 Hirsch, 86.

34 Sam Houston Memorial Museum, Huntsville, Texas.

35 James L. Haley, *Sam Houston* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2002), 404.

36 H. Allen Anderson, "Houston, Temple Lea," *The Handbook of Texas* v.III (1996), III, 720-721.

37 2009 Colt Archive Service Price List.

<http://www.coltsmfg.com/upload/pdfs/Archive%20Services%20Price%20List%202009.pdf>