



Official State Historical Center of the Texas
Rangers law enforcement agency.

**The Following Article was Originally Published in the
*Texas Ranger Dispatch Magazine***

The *Texas Ranger Dispatch* was published by the Texas Ranger Hall of Fame and Museum from 2000 to 2011. It has been superseded by this online archive of Texas Ranger history.

Managing Editors

Robert Nieman 2000-2009; (b.1947-d.2009)

Byron A. Johnson 2009-2011

Publisher & Website Administrator

Byron A. Johnson 2000-2011

Director, Texas Ranger Hall of Fame

Technical Editor, Layout, and Design

Pam S. Baird



Funded in part by grants from
the Texas Ranger Association Foundation

Copyright 2017, Texas Ranger Hall of Fame and Museum, Waco, TX. All rights reserved. Non-profit personal and educational use only; commercial reprinting, redistribution, reposting or charge-for-access is prohibited. For further information contact: Director, Texas Ranger Hall of Fame and Museum, PO Box 2570, Waco TX 76702-2570.


[Rangers Today](#)
[Visitor Info](#)
[History](#)
[Research Center](#)
[Hall of Fame](#)
[Student Help](#)
[Family History](#)
[News](#)

★ [Click Here for
A Complete Index
to All Back Issues](#)

★ [Dispatch Home](#)

★ [Visit our nonprofit
Museum Store!](#)

★ [Contact the Editor](#)

Guns of the Texas Rangers: Colt's Single Action Army

by David Stroud

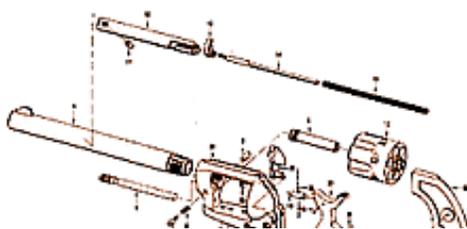


Horace Smith and Daniel Wesson created their first partnership in 1852 for the sole purpose of manufacturing the Frame Volcanics. After a production of 1,000 pistols, they sold their company to Volcanic Repeating Arms Company in mid-1855. They formed a second partnership a year later to develop a self-contained metallic-cartridge handgun. Their efforts not only produced the first of many weapons with the famed Smith & Wesson name but also the small .22 caliber known simply as S & W Model 1 First Issue Revolver, which quickly revolutionized the firearms industry.

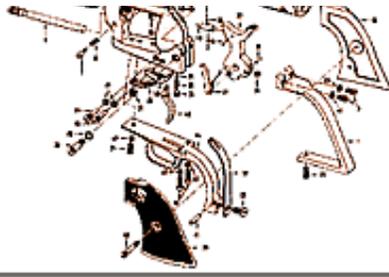
Colt Firearms was forced to wait until the S & W patent expired before they could offer their firearms in larger caliber. Once cleared, they converted weapons designed as “cap and ball” revolvers to fire cartridges. These unique Colts are known to collectors as “conversions,” and they were produced in comparably small numbers. There were 72,000 of nine models made over a short period of time compared to the 1860 Army (250,500), the 1851 Navy (215,348), and the 1849 Pocket (325,000).

Colt's initial non-converted handgun (Model 1871-1872 Open Top) appears to be a conversion, but it was actually Colt's first revolver specifically manufactured to fire a cartridge. There were 7,000 produced. Regardless of the fascination conversions possess, they pale in historical comparison to the New Model Army Metallic Cartridge Revolving Pistol, or Model P, introduced in 1873.

The Colt factory had begun work on the Single 100 rounds. The only difficulty was having one defective cartridge fail to fire. Major J. B. Benton laid the weapon in the snow, poured water over it, and left it for three days and nights. When officers retrieved the Colt, they found it had rusted considerably “but worked perfectly” as they shot another 200 rounds. Only two cartridges failed to fire. The weapon was tested for accuracy by firing ten shots at a target at fifty yards distance. The Colt's mean absolute deviation was only 3.11 inches. Although the board tested a Smith & Wesson, as well as other revolvers, Colt's new revolver outperformed the others so well that the Army ordered 8,000 of them for its cavalry the following year.



The sturdy handgun was a single action (the hammer had to be pulled back and cocked before it could be fired), and this movement produced four distinctive clicks that, the legend



manufactured.

goes, spelled C-O-L-T. It was a six-shot, .45-caliber revolver with a 7 ½-inch barrel and a pinched frame (constriction of the top strap to form the rear sight). On serial numbers 1-24,000, *COLT'S PT.F.A. MFG. CO. HARTFORD, CT. U.S.A.* was engraved in italics and slanted on the first 100

The grips were one-piece walnut, and the 1871 and 1872 patent dates appeared in two lines on the left front of the case-hardened frame through the first 34,000. After that, the two dates were put on a single line with the 1875 date added on line below. The rampant colt trademark was stamped next to these dates at the beginning of the 130,000 serial number range and was continued with only slight variation.

Contrary to popular belief, neither the cartridge nor Colt's new single-revolver action caused an immediate switch from cap-and-ball firearms. It took nearly two years for Colt to complete the Army contract and offer the new gun to the public. Men familiar with cap-and-ball weapons were reluctant to place their lives in the unproven capability of a cartridge. However, as more of Colt's single actions were made available, the guns quickly earned the confidence of those who depended on a reliable weapon, and the .45 caliber "Peacemaker" was on its way to becoming the most famous sidearm of the American West.

In 1874, Colt offered its new revolver to the public. No changes were made until 1875, when it was offered with a 7 ½-inch or 5 ½-inch barrel as well the Single Action Colt Frontier Six-Shooter in .44/.40. Colt continued to meet public demands and, in 1875, offered a 5 ½-inch barrel for the first time. Eventually, there were thirty different calibers to choose from.

The Colt Factory offered another variety of their fast-selling Single Action Revolver in 1882 with the Sheriff's or Storekeeper's Model. This weapon came without an ejector in various calibers and barrel lengths from 2 ½ to 7 ½ inches. Six years later, the Flattop Target model came in calibers from .22 to .476 Eley. In 1894, the Bisley Single Action Army and the Flattop Target were introduced to the public in calibers similar to the Flattop. Its most common barrel lengths were 4 ¾, 5 ½, and 7 ½.

During 1893, along with different models, Colt also changed from one-piece wood grips to two-piece hard rubber ones with the Colt logo, an eagle, and shield. The hard-rubber eagle grips were discontinued during 1896 and replaced with two-piece hard-rubber grips with a rampant colt within an oval circle. As always, plain or carved ivory grips were available as well as nickel-plated finishing or hand engraving.



The Colt Single Action was the handgun of the Old West, and Texas Rangers, soldiers, sheriffs, civilians, and outlaws turned the workhorse into an American legend. Over the years, the revolver was given nicknames such



as "Equalizer," "thumb-buster," "plow handle," "hog-leg," and "Peacemaker." Longer slogans were offered when an admirer had more time to speak, and many an ear listened as an old-timer repeated, "Fear no man regardless of his size . . . pull me, and I will equalize," or "Judge Colt and his jury of six."



The term "Peacemaker" was first used by Captain Samuel Walker to address Sam Colt in an 1847 letter from Mexico. Although the "Peacemaker" model was a Single Action in .45 caliber only, many have used the term for all Colt Single Actions Revolvers.

Sources:

Flayderman, Norm. *Flayderman's Guide to Antique American Firearms and their Values.*

Haven, Charles, and Frank A. Belden. *A History of the Colt Revolver from 1866 to 1940.*

Hemphill, Jerry R. *Colts From Texas and The Old West.*

Keating, Bern. *The Flamboyant Mr. Colt and His Deadly Six-Shooter.*

Peterson, Harold L. *Pageant of the Gun.*

Wilson, R. L. *Colt, An American Legend.* Yates, J. W., Jr. *Yearly Variations of the Colt Single Action Army Revolver.*

David Stroud was born in Tyler, Texas, and graduated from Henderson (Texas) High School in 1963. He enlisted in the Marines the following year and served a tour in Vietnam and two years as a drill instructor at Parris Island, South Carolina. He earned his B.S. and M.A. degrees in history at Stephen F. Austin State University and is a history instructor at Kilgore (Texas) College. He has written seven books, along with fifteen articles and book reviews.



Top

Texas Ranger

DISPATCH

