



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 It has been superseded by this online archive of Texas Ranger history.

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Funded in part by grants from
the Texas Ranger Association Foundation

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Guns of the Texas Rangers:

The Colt Model 1851 Navy

by David Stroud



Sam Colt was never satisfied with his latest revolver, regardless of the praise it produced and the acclaims it received. Even as the initial Patersons came off the production line in 1836, the inventor was seeking improvements.



Colt "Texas" Paterson with later M1851 Loading Lever

By 1842, four models were created before bankruptcy forced Colt to close the factory. The Mexican War (1846-1848) and Captain Samuel Walker allowed Colt to return to the arms business he loved, and the doors never shut again.

The Paterson was an average-sized weapon, but the Walkers and Dragoons proved to be massive revolvers, to say the least. In fact, Rangers Ben McCulloch

and Jack Hays criticized the size and weight of the bulky weapons.

In 1850, as the United States searched for compromises to allow California to enter the Union as a free state, Colt produced two revolvers of lighter weight to accommodate the public and attract the military.



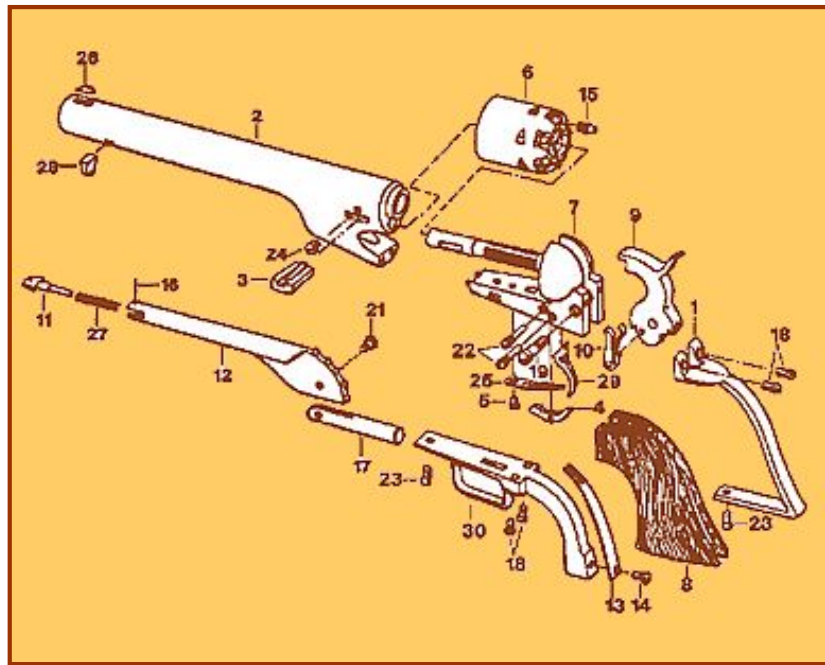
Colt Walker

The Model 1848, better known as the Baby Dragoon, was Colt's initial offering. The pistol was a five-shot, .31-caliber revolver, only 8 inches in length, with a three-inch barrel. The small revolver was not equipped with a loading lever. The Baby Dragoon quickly evolved into the Model 1849, or Pocket Model, which provided the public a choice of a four-, five-, or six-inch barrel and a five- or six-shot cylinder. The Pocket Models were equipped with loading levers. The undersized weapon proved to Colt's best-selling revolver: at the end of percussion production in 1873, more than 350,000 had been manufactured.

However, the military's need for a slightly larger revolver with more firepower caused Colt to quickly return to the drawing board. The solution was to simply increase the size and caliber of the Pocket Model. The result was the Model 1851 Navy revolver.

The Pocket Model and the Navy were both placed into production in 1850. Because of inaccurate research, collectors labeled them incorrectly as to the years they were introduced, and they shall forever be known as the '49 Pocket and '51 Navy.

The basic 1851 Navy is easily recognized as a .36-caliber, six-shot, single-action percussion with a 7-½ inch octagonal barrel. The barrels are addressed, and the brass backs straps and trigger guards are silver-plated. The round cylinder is non-rebated and non-fluted with small pins near the nipples. These pins serve as a safety feature to keep the hammer away from the capped nipples when not in use. The grips are one-piece wood, and all are hand-fitted to the gun by workers.



Sam Colt never forgot those who helped him. The Republic of Texas bought his weapons in great numbers, and the Rangers added fame to his revolvers as they battled Indians, Mexican troops and bandits. In gratitude to the Rangers, the inventor initially called the Navy Model, “the new Ranger-size pistol,” or more simply, the Ranger. Regardless of the original name, the term *Navy* quickly replaced it, and that well-known name has caused many inaccuracies.



Samuel Colt

One of the possibilities for the use of the term *Navy* may have been the cylinder scene engraved by W. L. Ormsby. In tribute to the Texas Navy’s initial purchase of his Paterson revolvers, Colt had the battle between the Lone Star fleet and the Mexican Navy roll-engraved on the cylinder of the new model with “Engaged 16 May 1843” appearing below it.

In order to appeal for Navy contracts, Colt used the expression *Navy* to indicate .36-caliber rather than the .44-caliber required by the Army. The United States Navy did purchase some 8,500 Navies with iron back straps, while the U. S. Army contracted for even more with the brass back strap.

The '51 Navy was the revolver that brought Sam Colt universal fame, and more than 240,000 were built before the production ceased in 1873. In fact, as of 1947, nearly one million pistols had used the basic design of the Navy.

As good as the Navy was, Colt continued searching for improvements. Soon after the first Navies rolled off the assembly line, improved '51s were being introduced, demonstrating perfectly the gun maker’s constant search for the faultless weapon. Because of these modest alterations, the '51 Navy has been divided into several models and sub-models. (All serial numbers are approximate, as strict record keeping was not a standard practice).

The FIRST MODEL SQUARE BACK has the square-back trigger guard, brass

back strap, and thin barrel lug, with the barrel wedge above the screw. This early model's loading notch is the non-beveled V type, and the one-piece, wooden grips are the Slim Jim style with an upward flare of the butt on each side of the brass butt straps. The wedge screw is under the wedge, and the 5/16" wedge is placed through the thin barrel lug upside down. The serial number range is 1-1250.

The **SECOND MODEL SQUARE BACK** retained the brass square-back trigger guard, brass back strap with the screw placed above the wedge, along with the wedge entering up right. The barrel lug is thin and the cylinder pin is slotted. The serial number range is 1250-4200.

The **EARLY THIRD MODEL** has the small, round, brass trigger guard, brass back strap, and V-loading notch with the wedge screw over the wedge. The loading lever screw enters from the right. The serial number range is 4200 to 30000.

The **MIDDLE THIRD MODEL** has the small, round, brass trigger guard, brass back strap, V-loading lever, thick barrel lug, and the screw is over the wedge. The loading lever screw enters from the left side as do all the exterior screws, and the barrel lug was increased in size from 5/16" to 7/16." The serial number range is 30000-37500.

Most of the **LATE THIRD MODELS** have the small, round, brass trigger guards and brass back straps. A small number are found with round iron trigger guards and back straps. The barrel lug is thick, the wedge is over the screw, and the loading notch is now beveled. The serial number range is 37500-85000.

The **EARLY FOURTH MODEL** has the larger round brass or iron trigger guard and the lading notch is beveled with a thick barrel wedge. The serial number range is 85000-118500.

The **MIDDLE FOURTH MODEL** retains the large brass round trigger guard and back straps of brass or iron. The loading notch is beveled with a thick barrel wedge, and the screw is over the wedge. The serial number range is 118500-16500.

The **LATE FOURTH MODEL** has the large brass trigger guard, a brass or iron back strap with beveled loading notch, and a thick barrel wedge with the screw over the wedge. The serial number range is 16500-215000.

EARLY LONDON NAVIES have the larger round, brass trigger guards; back straps with Slim Jim grips; and V-loading notches with the loading lever screw entering from the right side. The thick barrel lug is present as are British proof marks. The serial number range is 1-2000.

LONDON-LONDONS have the round iron trigger guard and back strap and V-loading notches with the loading lever screw entering from the left side. The thick barrel lug is present, as are British proof marks. The serial number range is 2000-38500.

HARTFORD-LONDONS have the round brass or iron trigger guards and back straps and beveled-loading notches, with the loading lever screw enter from the left side. The thick barrel lug is there as are British proof marks. The serial number range is 38000-43000.

Sam Colt used every means and every spot available to publicize his weapons, and the top of the barrel was no exception. The Paterson barrels were stamped "Patent Arms M'g. Co., Paterson, N.J. Colt's Patent." The Walkers, as well as the Dragoons and the '49 Pockets, bore the mark "Address Sam'l Colt, New York City." However, with the production of the '51 Navy, several addresses were used:

"-ADDRESS SAML COLT NEW-YORK CITY-"

The dashes are on the barrel, with the L [ITALICS] in his name elevated, with a line below it. Serial number ranges are about 1-7,400.

"-ADDRESS SAML COLT HARTFORD CT.-"

The L [ITALICS] in Colt's name is elevated, with a line below. Serial number range is approximately 7,400-101,000.

"-ADDRESS COLT SAML COLT NEW YORK U. S. AMERICA-"

The Serial number ranges are around 101,000-215,000.

The barrel addresses offer an introduction into Sam Colt's business tactics. Since the Navies were mostly made in Hartford, with a few manufactured in London, England, we can only speculate as to the New York addresses.

The Paterson revolver was stamped with the Paterson, New Jersey, address. But as Walker's were being built in Whitneyville, Connecticut, the barrel stamping was changed to New York City.

One possibility of the use of the New York address is the Southern market, whose buyers took unkindly to abolitionists. The anti-slavery movement was especially strong in New England, and Connecticut was no exception. William Lloyd Garrison founded *The Liberator* in Boston, and Southerners hated that radical publication. The Hartford Convention had met in secret from December 1814 to January 1815. The final report of those twenty-six New England Federalists was moderate, but it did call for the repeal of the constitutional three-fifths compromise that gave the slave-holding states additional representation and electrical votes. Sam realized that few Southerners forgot such affronts.

New York was an exception among Northern states. Yankees from New York were extremely Southern in their political views, and the most famous city's newspapers often read as if they were published south of the Mason-Dixon line. Also, Hartford was not as well known as New York City, and any order addressed to Sam Colt would find its way to his sales office there. In 1857, Colt returned to his Hartford stamp for reasons known only to the inventor, and he then resumed the New York address in 1861, along with the personal title of "Colonel."

This Colonel designation is somewhat vague. Colt did serve as major commandant of the First Troop of Governor's Horse Guard in Connecticut, but that was an honorary title rather than military. After the war began in 1861, Sam offered to raise and equip, at his own expense, a Hartford regiment. However, the unit never formed and the rank was withdrawn.

The best explanation for the title is Colt's appointment by the governor as a member of the executive's staff. That position carried the title of colonel. With

an ever-present eye on military contracts, Colt felt that any suggested military experience would help. [Picture of Samuel Colt #15]

Government contracts were always a concern to Colt and may have been the reason for the square-back trigger guard found on his early weapons. The Walker as well as the First and Second Model Dragoon pistols all had the non-practical trigger guards. However, Colonel Talcot had affection for them and believed they offered a more graceful appearance than the round guard. If a small piece of brass would win a contract, Sam would provide it. In 1852, Talcot was gone and the small, round, trigger guard replaced the square back.

Another means of attracting military and civilian sales was the idea of an attachable shoulder stock, which would easily convert the revolver into a six-shot carbine. The inspiration may have come to Colt from the 1855 Springfield Pistol-Carbine issued to the Dragoons. The Springfield was a single-shot, whereas Colt offered a multi-firing weapons for consideration. He received two patents for the shoulder stock in January 1859. The first of these is for a wooden stock and the second for a canteen stock of metal, or two pieces of wood. Both can be attached to '51 Navy's 4-screw cut for shoulder stock.

These revolvers have a stud (screw) in the frame, and the percussion shield has been cut to receive the pronged fore-end of the attachable stock. Also, the back strap has a groove to accept the bottom of the fore-end of the stock. Most of the 4-screw Navies have iron trigger guards or the small, rounded ones of brass. They also have a swivel attached to the front of the trigger guard. The swivel is present on 4-screw Navies from approximate serial numbers 67,000-79,000. After this last number, they were terminated. The shoulder-stock models are found in the serial number ranges of 90000-93000; 100,000; 128,000; 189,000; and 192,000. A mystery is presented with the Navies in the 135000-166000 serial number range: there are 4-screw frames, but the brass back straps are not milled to accept the stock. According to Nathan L. Swayze, the foremost authority on Colt Navies, this was simply Colt continuing his practice of using spare trigger guards on regular Navies. The shoulder-stocked Navies were never popular, and the model was discontinued around 1866.

Another method used by Colt to attract the military market was the stamping of serial numbers on various parts of the revolver. Sam's revolvers are stamped with more serial numbers than any other revolver known to the author. This is a blessing for collectors, for a quick glance will determine if all of the major parts are original to the gun. The inventor informed the military that by having the numbers on different parts, it would require the soldier to be responsible for his weapon. He would not be able to damage the cylinder, for example, and then replace it with that of another soldier's weapon.

Serial numbers appear on the cylinder, loading lever, wedge, barrel, frame, trigger guard, and butt of the back strap. They are also written with ink inside the grip grove. When a weapon appears with mixed serial numbers, the parts have been switched. A cylinder, for example, will sometimes be encountered with no serial number, yet appear contemporary to the gun. The reason is that the part was ordered from the factory as a replacement. Were the revolver returned to the factory for repair, replaced parts would have been numbered.

In 1851, Sam Colt took more than 500 weapons to the Great Exhibition in Great Britain. Those he displayed were beautifully engraved examples of outstanding art. While spectators admired the displayed models, regular revolvers were sold to the public. Because the English were so enthusiastic for his revolvers, and he wanted to get around the tariffs, Colt established a

factory in London in January 1863. Some Navy models were made there and stamped accordingly:

HARTFORD-LONDONS—These revolvers were built in London from parts shipped from the Hartford factory and have brass back straps with small, round, brass trigger guards. The London address is present on the barrel (–ADDRESS COL. COLT LONDON–). The dashes in the address are arrows. Estimated serial number range is 1-2000.

LONDON-LONDONS—These Navies have iron back straps and large, round, iron trigger guards. On the barrel top “–ADDRESS COL. COLT LONDON–“ is stamped. Estimated serial range is 2001-43000.

All Colts made in London have two British proof marks stamped on them. One is a crown over “GP,” which stands for gun makers’ proof, and the other is a crown over “V,” signifying “view.”

The military’s purchase of Walkers and Dragoons did not go unnoticed. The military was a valuable market, and Colt certainly believed it would be a ready buyer for his improved pistol. However, that was not the case. Although the Ordnance Department favorably tested the Navy in 1850, the initial order by the Army did not arrive until January 15, 1855. The two branches of the military are represented by these models:

ARMY-NAVIES are the early types with brass back straps and round trigger guards. Once inspected and approved, each revolver was stamped with the initials of various inspectors on assorted metal parts, as well with a “US” on the left side of the frame below Colt’s patent. Most of the 1,465 Navies ordered were issued to the 2nd U.S. Cavalry, one of the most famous pre-Civil War units of American history. The Indian-fighting regiment was the Army’s elite unit, and it furnished sixteen generals to the Union and Confederate military during the Civil War. Officers such as Robert E. Lee, John Bell Hood, Albert Sidney Johnston, George H. Thomas, and James Ewell Brown (JEB) Stuart gained first-hand knowledge of the effectiveness of Colt’s new weapon while engaging Comanche and Kiowa warriors in Texas. By June of 1859, the Army bought 16,962 Navies and most were in the serial number range of 42,000-80,000.+

NAVY-NAVIES are the later types with iron back straps and large, round, iron trigger guards. They have the small “U.S.” stamped on the frame below “Colt’s Patent” and “U.S.N.” on the butt of the back strap. They are in the serial number range of 89000-91000. The first order, in June 1852, was for 100 belt pistols to outfit Commander Perry’s expedition to the East Indies and the China Sea. Several states also purchased the belt-size revolvers to equip their militia. In 1857, Indiana received 250, and that same year New Hampshire bought 300. Texas ordered 368 Navies in August 1858, and former Ranger Ben McCulloch purchased 300 in the summer of 1860. Another 300 with iron back straps and trigger guards were bought by the state quartermaster, General R. C. Thom.

When the Civil War began in 1861, approximately 98,000 ’51 Navies had been produced. The demand for Colt’s excellent revolver increased during that bitter conflict. Union officers were required to purchase their uniforms and weapons, and many of the soldiers selected the ’51 Navy as their firearm. Because the weapons were privately purchased, there are no government markings on them.

The Navy proved even more popular among Confederate officers and enlisted men. One explanation is availability. In 1860, Colt introduced his Army revolver in .44-caliber, but these weapons were fobbed for Confederate purchase. Therefore, Southern soldiers were better able to acquire the Navies, and many of them did so as they armed themselves for service. By the war's end in April 1865, another 87,000 Navies had been produced and a number of them became the property of Confederate soldiers by battlefield supply.

The close of war did not decrease the public's demand for Colt firearms. Reconstruction and the Westward movement opened new markets to the company. Although Sam Colt died in early 1862, the company he founded continued to produce excellent weapons with an ever-present eye to the future.

The gunfighters, outlaws, and gamblers of the cow towns and barrooms added another colorful chapter to Colt history, as did the Texas Rangers and lawmen who tried to contain them. Shootists such as John Wesley Hardin, Jesses and Frank James, Ben Thompson and his brother William ("Texas Billy"), and many more were introduced to the firearms during the percussion period. Men such as these made use of many different guns, and undoubtedly '51 Navies were part of their learning experiences.



John Henry "Doc" Holliday was given a '51 Navy by his uncle, Doctor John S. Holliday, following the Civil War. The future dentist spent many hours perfecting his shooting skills in the Georgia countryside before tuberculosis forced him west.

However, the most famous gunman who favored the Navy above other arms was James Butler ("Wild Bill") Hickok. He was fast and deadly, and long before he was murdered in Deadwood, Dakota Territory in 1876, he had acquired the title "Prince of Pistoleers."

The 1851 Navy is believed to have been Sam Colt's personal favorite. The evidence is derived from the only image of Colt with a weapon. The revolver that is in that picture is the Navy. Colt's personal revolvers seemed to have been an engraved pair of Navies with ivory grips displaying a horse head. In addition to the portrait, Colt favored the Navy for presentation to individuals who could help his business. Among the many recipients of these beautifully engraved gifts were President Franklin Pierce, Secretary of War John B. Floyd, Sam Houston, Czar Nicholas, and Colonel Thomas Lally.

Today, the Colt 1851 Navy is a much sought-after revolver by collectors, and prime examples demand princely sums. Anyone interested in purchasing one of these historical Colts is urged to contact reputable dealers and read as many books on the subject as possible. As Sam Colt urged: "Be aware of frauds."



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.



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