

# THE MODEL 1851 COLT NAVY

By Nathan L. Swayze



NATHAN L. SWAYZE

Mr. President, members of the Society and guests. I must admit that I feel a bit ill at ease appearing on your program today, for a couple of reasons. First, I am a brand new member of the Society. Second, I always speak "off the cuff," using guns on a table in front of me for my outline; however, I was told that if I accepted the honor and privilege of speaking, it was mandatory that I arrive at the meeting with my talk neatly typed, double spaced, with all spelling and punctuation correct. So please bear with me in an attempt to read a speech — something I am not accustomed to.

Before I get the Colt Navy show on the road, there are two things that I would like to explain. First, why I am on the program, and second, why my subject is the Model 1851 Colt Navy. As all of you members recall, a new member is on probation the first meeting he attends, until he receives that diploma — I mean Certificate — and you had better believe that I was on my P's and Q's, using the best manners that I am capable of using. Early during the first day of the meeting in New Orleans (which was my first) I happened to be standing in a small crowd discussing, naturally, antique guns. In the crowd was your very capable Chairman of the Speakers Committee, Mr. George Missbach. Harry Knode was also there. During a lull in the conversation — and still trying to be nice — I mentioned to Mr. Missbach that I had made numerous talks on antique guns before

Civic Clubs, School Assemblies, etc., and because I spoke "off the cuff," I would be glad to fill in if, for some reason, a scheduled speaker was unable to attend at the last minute. That Mr. Missbach is certainly quick on the draw, for he immediately replied: "How about our next meeting in Houston?" That floored me, and the only feeble excuse I could muster was the fact that I was a new member, and most of the people wouldn't even know who I was. This didn't phase him one bit, for his prompt reply was: "Don't let that throw you, for I remember one new member that made a talk at the first meeting he attended." Gentlemen, you'll have to admit that there just ain't much argument to an answer like that! So that's why I am on the program.

After giving up completely, and still trying to be nice, I asked a very simple question: "On what subject would you like me to speak?" As fast as Mr. Missbach is, he didn't get a chance at that one, for Harry Knode — in his usual genteel, quiet manner of speaking, piped up and said: "What in the Hell else do you know but Navy Colts!" That, gentlemen, is the reason I am speaking on the Model 1851 Colt Navy. If everybody is ready, and still awake, I guess we can get the Colt Navy show on the road.

I am not going to delve too deeply into any phase of Colt history. To you who might specialize in the Colt field, history would be old stuff. To you who do not specialize in this field, it would be boring. One short observation, however, would probably be in order.

If we were to make a broken line graph of the size and weight of Sam Colt's handguns, we would wind up with a ragged chart indeed! Starting with his average size Patterson Model, Colt quickly jumped to the ultimate in size and weight with his Walker Model, then to his Dragoon Models. From there to the bottom of the chart with his small Baby Dragoon Model, which quickly evolved into the Model of 1849, Pocket Model or 49er — whichever you prefer. This particular Model is often called Sam Colt's "Bread and Butter Gun." It was highly successful from a sales standpoint, for it made an excellent pocket gun, as well as house gun to be kept in the top drawer next to the bed. We all know that Sam Colt was a sharp salesman. He could see the need for a heavier hand gun that packed a bit more punch; so I'll take a guess and say that because of a combination of the success of his pocket model, and the need for a bit larger gun resulted in the birth of the '51 Navy, which is really nothing more than an overgrown Pocket Model. We have all heard that old saying: "If only these old guns could talk, what interesting tales they could tell!" If such a miracle were to occur, I am quite certain the '51 Navy would lead the field in exciting stories told, for this particular model certainly had its share in making history from the Gold Rush fields of California to the Bush Country of Australia. Because of its lighter weight and ability to pack a healthy punch, the '51 Navy was a favorite sidearm of both the Confederate and Union forces during the Civil War. Many were sold to the U. S. Army and the U. S. Navy. They were also used as martial arms by England, Canada, Austria, Australia and others.

To you Colt collectors who have made a study of the '51 Navy, I am quite certain that you could — if you wanted to — really embarrass a general Colt collector by asking him this question: "How many physical

variations are there in the '51 Colt Navy?" His answer would probably be: "Oh, quite a few. For instance, some have square back trigger guards, some have small rounded trigger guards, some have large rounded trigger guards, some of the grips are fatter than others." And this is about the time that he would begin to mumble in an attempt to think of others. This is the point where you can really let him have it, by simply saying: "Just listen to this:

1. There are five different barrel addresses
2. There are three different types of front sights
3. There are two thicknesses of the loading lever catch under the muzzle end of the barrel.
4. There are three different types of loading notch in the barrel lug.
5. There are two thicknesses of the barrel lug.
6. There are three types of frames.
7. There are two sizes of cylinder pins.
8. There are two different designs of knurling on the hammer spur.
9. There are two types of back straps.
10. There are four shapes of trigger guards.
11. There are three types of wood grips.
12. There are two styles of serial number stampings.
13. Some of the loading lever rammer screws enter from the left, and some from the right.
14. Ormsby's signature appears on some of the cylinders and not on others.
15. The Colt patent stamping is in three different locations.
16. The "36 Cal." stamping appears on some of the trigger guards and not on others.
17. Some of the triggers are short, and some are long.
18. Some of the release catches on the fore end of the loading lever are knurled, and others are not.

Any way you slice it, this list totals eighteen, and this doesn't even take into consideration any Martial markings, or the fact that some left the factory as metallic cartridge models, and some were returned to the factory for conversion to the metallic cartridge. These metallic cartridge models would entail even more physical variations.

Many times, pictures are better than words; so let's have a look at some of the more important physical variations that I have been talking about. All of those listed will not be shown, because some are not too important. All 18 were given merely to show just how much you could really hurt a guy — if you wanted to. Incidentally — although I have them — I am not going to give the serial number ranges of these variations for two reasons. When the pictures are shown, it will be dark in here, and I shall be unable to read. I certainly don't have brains enough to memorize all of those numbers. Next, even if I had that excellent a memory, I seriously doubt that many of you could remember them.



PLATE 1

The top barrel address is the "early New York Address." Note that Colt has not as yet acquired the dubious title of "Colonel," and he hasn't as yet added the "U. S. America." We all know that Colt was a shrewd person, and I think we have an example here. Hartford, Conn. was — at that time — (with apologies to Jonathan Peck) a relatively small and unknown town in comparison to New York, which was the business and financial center of the U. S. A. Colt did maintain sales offices in New York; so he took advantage of the "Big Town" name by including it in the barrel address.

The barrel next from the top is the "Hartford Address" — same as the top address, except that he substituted Hartford for New York. I haven't the slightest idea why Colt deleted the "Big Town" name for Hartford. Maybe Hartford had grown a bit!

The third barrel from the top is the "Late New York Address." Note that Colt has added the title of "Colonel" before his name. It certainly doesn't denote a military title as we would think of it. Prior to the Civil War, Colt was appointed Major Commandant of the "First Troop of Governor's Horse Guard," which was more an honorary organization than a military organization. Anyway, far be it from Colt to lose out on a moniker like that, for it was certainly impressive — particularly to the Military, who were good customers. Also note that he has added the "U. S. America." Maybe this addition was due to his expansion of sales to foreign countries.

The barrel address on the next to bottom barrel is the "London Address." This address appears on those guns made in the London Armory. Note that the long dashes on each end of the address have what appears to be spear heads. Also note that there is a period after "Address," a colon after "Colonel," and a period after "Colt" and "London." I'm certainly not an expert on punctuation; however, this certainly doesn't look correct to me. However, if any of you have ever read any of Colt's correspondence, you will know that he was a past master at butchering the King's English, and an extremely poor speller — so I guess these

periods and colons figure! The address on the bottom barrel is what I call the "Hartford-London Address" — meaning those guns that were made in the Hartford factory for sale specifically on the London market. If you see a '51 Navy with this London address, and you want to know if it was made in Hartford or London, a quick way to determine this (without checking other physical variations) is a glance to see whether or not the long dashes have the spear points.

#### THERE ARE THREE TYPES OF FRONT SIGHTS: Plate 2

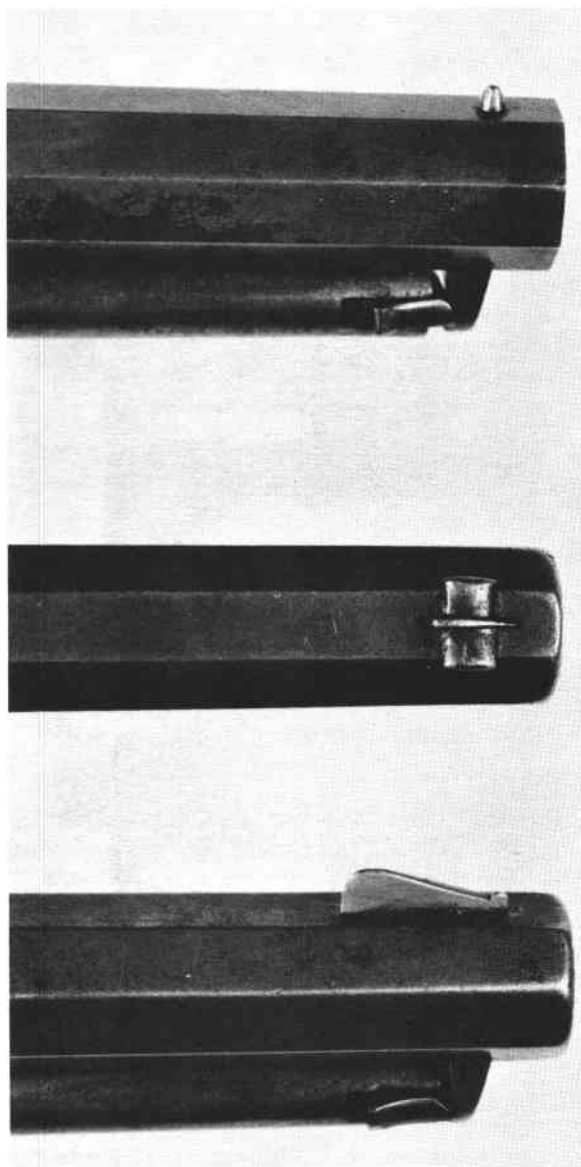


PLATE 2

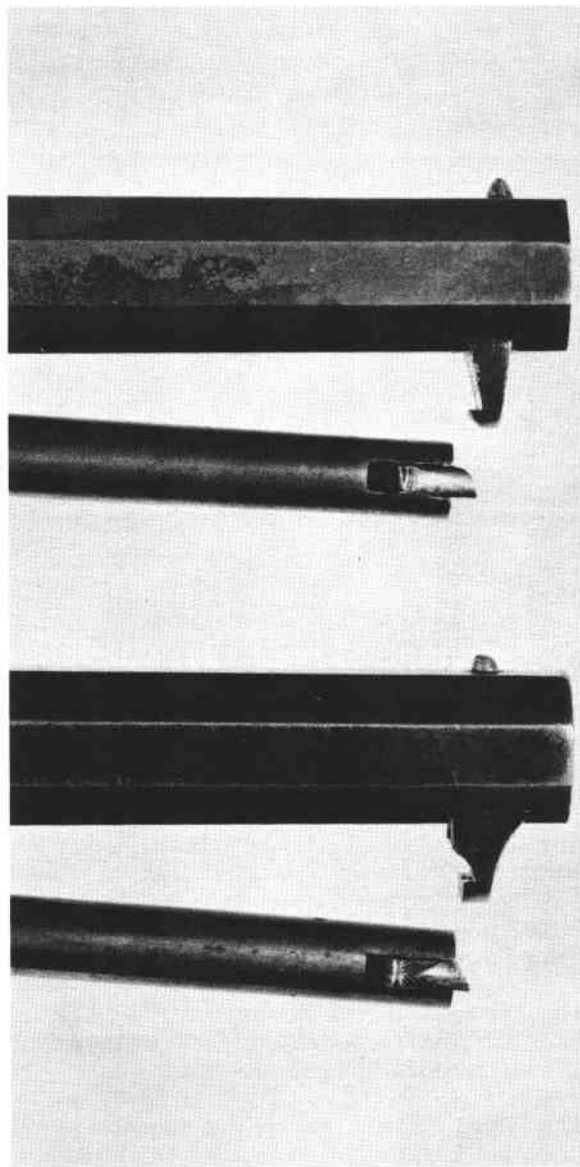


PLATE 3

The front sight shown on the top barrel is the most common type. It is known as the "pin" or "post" type sight. It is of brass, threaded, and screws into the barrel. The sight shown on the middle barrel is called the "dove-tail" sight, so-called because the base of the sight is "dove-tailed" into the barrel. These are found throughout the entire serial number range, and about the only place I can recall that they are concentrated is in the early 4 screw cut for stock models. The sight on the bottom barrel is known as the "blade" front sight. This one is a bit unusual, for it is a bit fancy. Although contemporary with the gun's use, it might not be original with the gun. The usual "blade" sight is more moon shaped.

THE LOADING LEVER CATCH UNDER THE MUZZLE END OF THE BARREL IS OF TWO THICKNESSES:  
Plate 3

The loading lever catch shown on the top barrel is the early "thin" type, while the one on the lower barrel is the later "thick" type. Obviously, this was an improvement on Colt's part from the standpoint of strength.

THERE ARE THREE DIFFERENT STYLES OF LOADING NOTCHES IN THE BARREL LEG: Plate 4

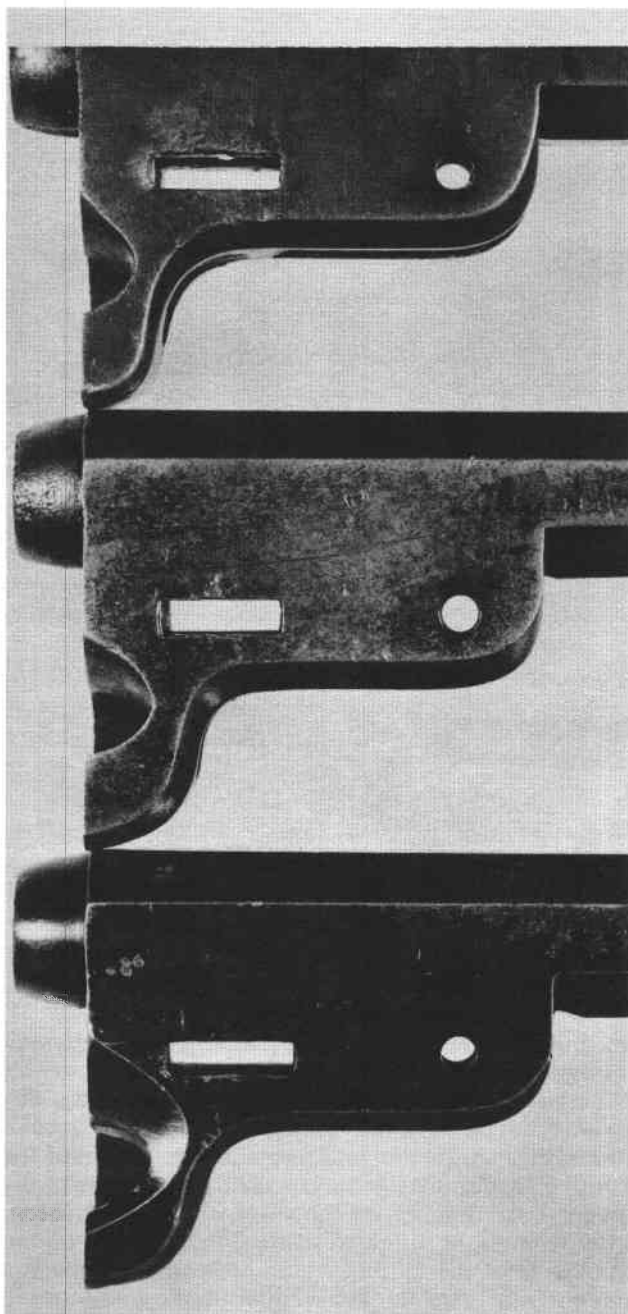


PLATE 4

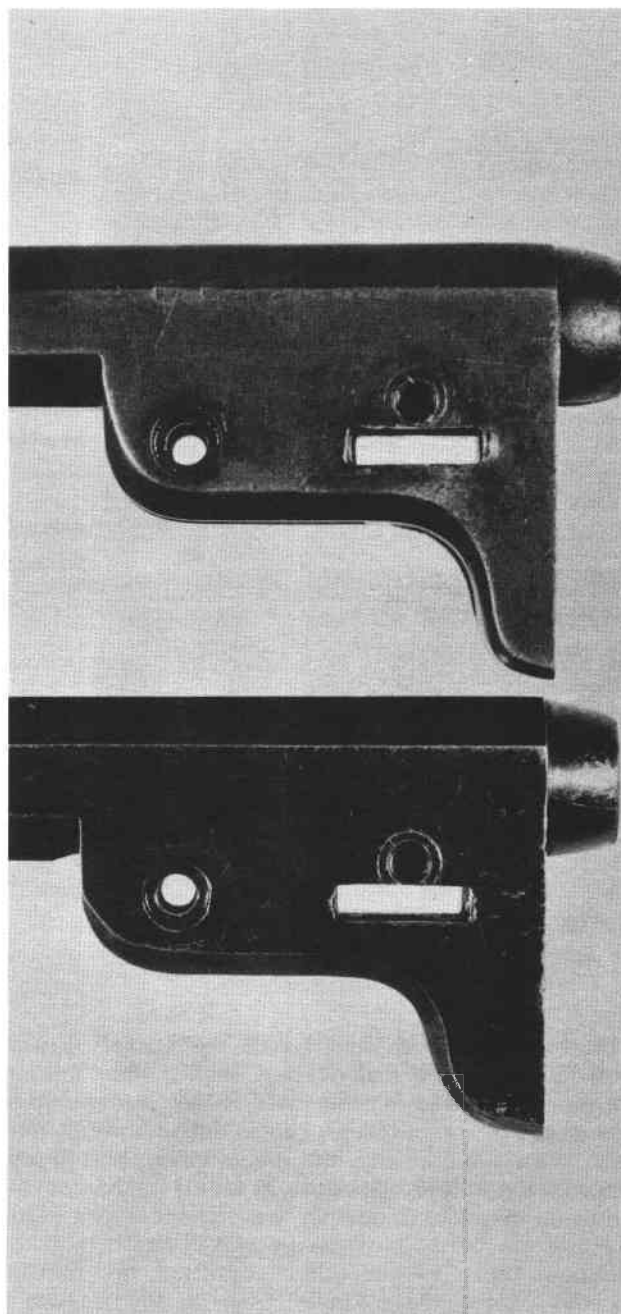


PLATE 5

The notch in the barrel lug of the top barrel is the early "V" style, so-called because the notch resembles the letter "V." The notch in the middle barrel is from a London model. Many of these have a notch that more closely resembles a "U" than a "V." This is not too evident on this photo because of the angle from

which it was taken. I sometimes refer to the style of notch as the "bowlegged V notch." The notch in the bottom barrel is the later "beveled notch" — an obvious improvement to hasten the placing of the lead balls on the face of the cylinder.

#### THERE ARE TWO THICKNESSES OF THE BARREL LUG: Plate 5

The barrel lug of the top barrel is the earlier "thin lug," while the one on the bottom is the later "thick lug," another obviously improvement from the standpoint of strength. There is circumstantial evidence that Colt didn't originate this improvement. It may have come from forged barrels furnished Colt for his production at the London Armory by Thomas Firth & Son.

#### THERE ARE THREE DIFFERENT TYPES OF FRAMES: Plate 6

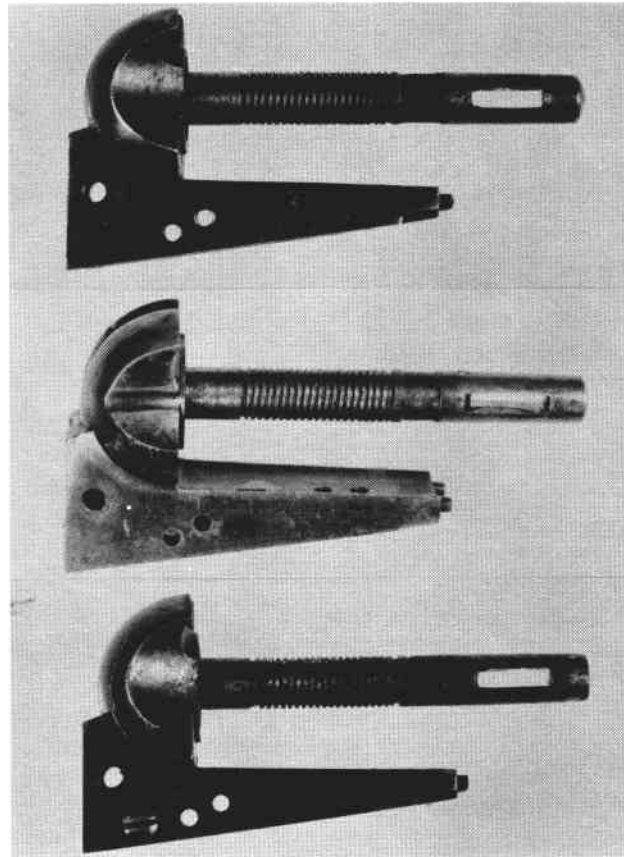


PLATE 6

The top frame is what I call the "Early Frame" for no improvements have been made. The percussion cut-out is larger and deeper, and it does not have the cap guiding groove. This percussion shield cut-out is more in the lower one-half of the percussion shield, although it doesn't appear this way in the photo due the angle of the camera. The middle frame is the "Late Frame." You will note that the cap guiding groove has been added, and the percussion shield cut-out is smaller, shallower and more in the center of the percussion shield. The bottom frame is the 4 screw cut for stock frame. The primary difference here is the addition of a fourth screw, which is actually a stud for the prongs, or fingers, of the stock attachment. Also, the bottom of the percussion shield has been milled to fit the prongs, or fingers, of the stock. While on the frames, there is one other variation, and that is in the thickness of the cylinder pin. Although not obvious in the photo, the cylinder pins on the London made Navies are a little thicker than on those made in the Hartford factory. This is not always true but generally it is. You can easily check this by taking a cylinder from a Hartford made Navy (that hasn't seen too much use), and trying to slip it over the cylinder pin on a London made Navy (that hasn't seen too much use). You will usually find that it won't fit.

#### THERE ARE TWO DIFFERENT DESIGNS OF THE HAMMER SPUR KNURLING: Plate 7



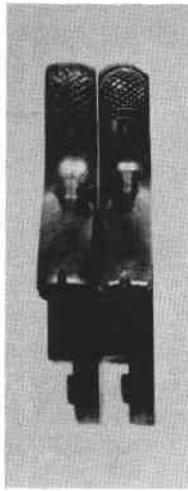


PLATE 7

The hammer spur knurling on the hammer to the left is typical of the Hartford made Navy. Note that the knurling is shallow, irregular and a rather loose design. The design on the hammer spur to the right from a London made Navy. Note the design has a more finished appearance, it is deeper and more regular. It is also enclosed on what I call an "inverted U."

THERE ARE FOUR DIFFERENT SHAPES OF TRIGGER GUARDS: Plate 8

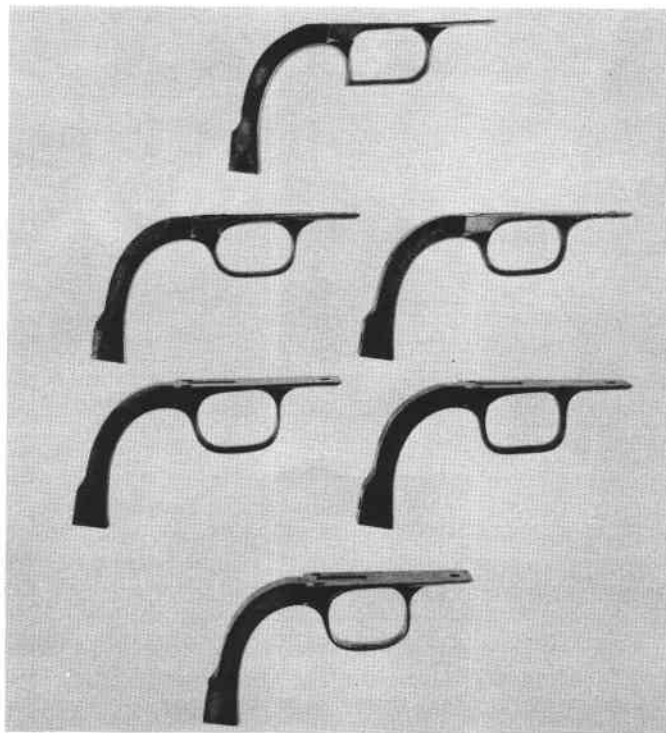


PLATE 8

The trigger guard shown at the top is the familiar square back trigger guard found on the first and second model square backs. The two trigger guards shown next down are the smaller rounded trigger guard found on the third model. One is brass, and the other is iron. In the third from top row, are two iron trigger guards. It is here that we get into the fourth shape. On the trigger guard to the left, note the bottom is more rounded, and the two bottom corners are also more rounded. Checking these features against the trigger guard to the right we find that the bottom is flat, and the two bottom corners have a smaller radii, giving them more of a right angle appearance. This large rounded, flat bottom type is the London type. Although you will occasionally find one on a Hartford made gun, it is my belief that they were all made in London — possibly by some one other than Colt. The trigger guard on the bottom is a large rounded brass trigger guard.

THERE ARE TWO TYPES OF BACK STRAPS: Plate 9

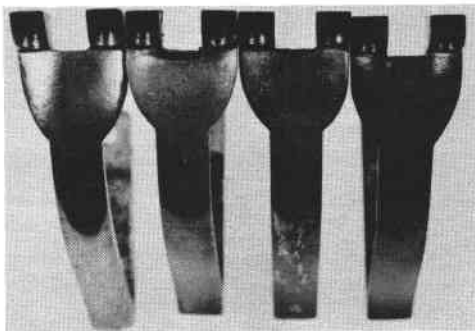


PLATE 9

The first, second and third back straps are Hartford back straps, and the one on the right is a London back strap. The difference in the two lies in the size of the milled groove appearing at the bottom and in between the two upright posts. Note that on the three to the left, the sizes range to no groove at all to a medium size groove. Why this variation, I don't know, unless it depended on the individual worker, or finisher. In comparison to these three, the London back strap (far right) has a rather large groove. It is cut approximately 1/4" back from the base of the hammer, and all those that I have observed seem to be consistent in size and depth.

THERE ARE THREE GENERAL SHAPES OF WOOD GRIPS: Plate 10

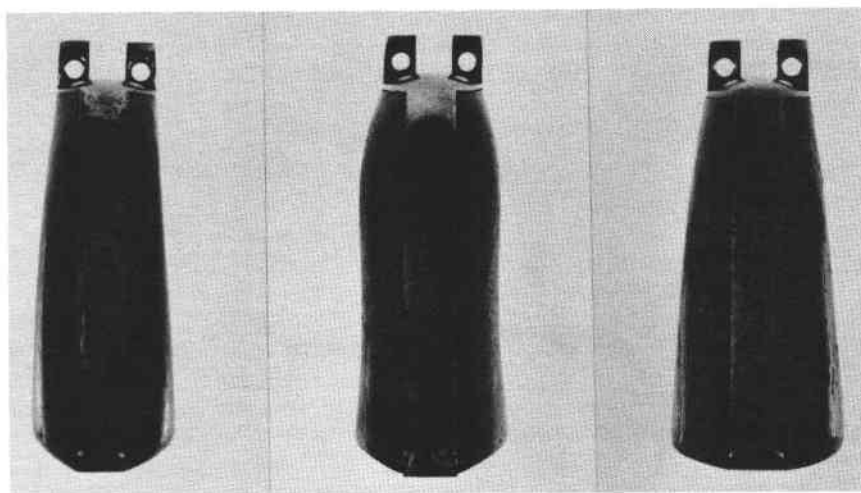


PLATE 10

Although the thickness of the wood grips vary, there are, generally speaking, three shapes. The one on the left is the "SlimJim" grips that is found on the First Model Square Back. Note that they are thin, and the bottom has a distinct upward flair. The grips in the middle is the London style. Note that the upward flair of the bottom is still there, and there is a distinct "bulge" in the upper portion of the grips, sometimes called the "wasp-waist." The grips on the right are the later Hartford type. Note that they are much thicker, or "fatter," and most of the upward flair has disappeared.

As I previously stated, I did not show photos of all the variations that I mentioned, for some are not too important; however, if any of those that I did mention — and did not show — are of any particular interest to any of you, I shall be only too glad to discuss them with you later.

The few remaining photos are on the four basic models — and sub-models of the '51 Navy. They are: (1) First Model — square back trigger guard (2) Second Model — square back trigger guard (3) Third Model — small rounded trigger guard and (4) Fourth Model — large rounded trigger guard. I have always felt that we would be much better off with only three classifications of the '51 Navy, and they would be: First Model — square back trigger guard (2) Second Model — Small rounded trigger guard and (3) Third Model — large rounded trigger guard. However, collectors — for some reason — have always broken down the square backs into two models — the First and Second Model; so far be it from me to make a change at this late date.

Now just a few words to explain to you how I gathered the information on the various physical variations. When I first became interested in the '51 Navy, there wasn't too much detailed information available. All of the Colt books had certain general information — which was good — but all the detail information just



wasn't there. I started gathering information for myself, and it grew from there. Starting off, I made notes on the back of envelopes, etc. (which I couldn't decipher later), then to a rough columnar type format (this didn't work either). The end result was the "fill in the blank card." (Plate 11) These were carried to gun collectors meetings, dealers places of business, etc., and over a period of time, over 400 were filled out,

FIRST		SECOND		THIRD		FOURTH	
Sub. Model:		Letter:		Orm. Sig.?		S #	
<b>BARRELL: Address</b>							
Lug:		Load Slot.:		Front Sight:			
L/L Catch:		Rammer Scr. Head:		L/L #'d?:			
<b>TRIGGER GUARD:</b>							
Large/Small:		Brass/Iron:		36 Cal.?:			
Insp. Init'l on Flats:		Others:		Round/F/S/R:			
<b>FRAME:</b>							
Colt's Pat.:		Cap. Slot?:		Perc. Shield C/O:			
<b>GRIPS:</b>							
Wood/Other:		S/J	Std.	Bulge	Back Strap:	B/S Notch:	
<b>REMARKS:</b>							
<b>OWNER:</b>				<b>DATE:</b>			

PLATE 11

by myself. At this stage, the subconscious mind, or sub-conscious memory, began to say: "You're getting more and more of the same thing." To check this a three foot by three foot columnar format was drawn off (plate 12), and the tedious process of transferring the information from the 400 plus cards to the master sheets was begun. This was done in serial number sequence, beginning with the lowest number. When the task was complete, the physical changes fell rather into slots.

Here we have an assembled view of the First Model and Second Model square back. (Plate 13) In the assembled state, about the only way to tell the difference is to check the wedge screw. Note that the wedge screw of the top Navy (First Model) is under the wedge, while this same screw on the bottom Navy (Second Model) is over the wedge, the same as on all the rest of Colt's percussion models. If we look at these same guns in an exploded view (Plate 14), we find one other variation. Note that on this gun (First Model), the cylinder pin is notched on the top to take care of the wedge, while on the exploded view of the Second Model (Plate 15), the cylinder pin is slotted to take care of the barrel wedge.

Now let's take a look at the Third Model (Plate 16), which is the small rounded trigger guard model. I have broken down this model (as well as the Fourth Model) into three Sub Models that I have termed Early, Middle and Late. This is because there are three physical variations in this model. If only two physical variations can break the square backs into two separate models, then I think three physical variations is sufficient justification to break one model down into three sub models.

The three physical variations are a combination of (1) the rammer screw entering from the opposite side (2) a "V" non-beveled loading notch and (3) a beveled loading notch.

The upper gun is an Early Third Model, with a combination of (1) the rammer screw entering from the opposite side with a (2) "V" non-beveled loading notch.

The middle gun is a Middle Third Model with a combination of (1) the rammer screw entering from the same side with a (2) "V" non-beveled loading notch.

SERIAL NUMBER	MODEL	SUB-MODEL	LETTERING (LARGE-MED-SMALL-?)	ORMSBY'S SIGNATURE?	BARREL ADDRESS	BARREL LUG	LOADING SLOT	FRONT SIGHT	LOADING LEVER CATCH	RAMMER SCR. HEAD SAME OR OPP SIDE?	LOADING LEVER NUMBERED?	SIZE AND SHAPE TRIGGER GUARD	TRIGGER GUARD BRASS OR IRON?	36. CALIBER PRESENT?	INSP'T. INITIALS ON T/G FLATS	INSP'T. INITIALS ELSEWHERE	TRIGGER GUARD ROUND OR F/S/R?	COLT PT. STAMP LARGE - MED - SMALL?	CAP SLOT?	PERC. SHIELD CUT-OUT SET HIGH OR LOW	GRIPS	GRIPS STANDARD?	BACK STRAP BRASS OR IRON?	NOTCH SIZE BACK STRAP
474	1ST	✓	S	?	EARLY NEW YORK	THIN	✓	PIN THIN	OP.	YES	S/B	B	NO	NO	T-K	NONE	S/B	L	NO	L	W	S/J	B	S
2487	2ND	✓	S	YES	EARLY NEW YORK	THIN	✓	PIN THIN	OP.	YES	S/B	B	NO	NO	O-T	NONE	S/B	S	NO	L	W	STR	B	L
9230	3RD	E	M	NO	EARLY NEW YORK	THIN	✓	PIN THIN	OP.	YES	S/R	B	NO	NO	R	NONE	R	S	NO	L	W	STR	B	L
26901	3RD	E	L	YES	EARLY NEW YORK	THIN	BEV D/T	THIN	SAME	YES	S/R	B	NO	NO	G-H	NONE	R	S	NO	L	W	STR	B	S
28358	3RD	E	S	?	EARLY NEW YORK	THIN	BEV PIN	THIN	OP.	YES	S/R	I	NO	NO	NONE	B-B	R	L	NO	L	W	STR	I	S
31627	3RD	M	M	YES	EARLY NEW YORK	THICK	✓	PIN THIN	SAME	YES	S/R	B	NO	NO	G-A	G	R	S	NO	L	W	STR	B	S
38061	3RD	L	L	NO	LONDON	THICK	BEV PIN	THIN	SAME	?	L/R	I	NO	NO	K	?	F/S/R	L	NO	L	W	STR	I	?
38576	3RD	L	L	YES	EARLY NEW YORK	THICK	BEV PIN	THIN	SAME	YES	S/R	B	?	?	G-J	NONE	R	M	NO	L	W	STR	B	M
39629	3RD	L	L	NO	LONDON	THICK	BEV PIN	THIN	SAME	YES	L/R	I	NO	NO	M-V	NONE	R	L	NO	L	W	STR	I	NONE
42175	3RD	L	L	?	LONDON	THICK	BEV PIN	THIN	SAME	YES	L/R	B	?	?	G	NONE	R	L	NO	L	W	STR	B	NONE
90814	4TH	E	L	NO	HARTFORD	THICK	BEV PIN	THIN	SAME	YES	L/R	I	NO	NO	G-B	E	R	L	NO	L	W	STR	I	S
91212	4TH	E	L	?	HARTFORD	THICK	BEV D/T	THIN	SAME	YES	L/R	B	?	?	?	?	R	?	NO	L	IV. STR	B	NONE	
100957	4TH	E	L	?	HARTFORD	THICK	BEV	?	THIN	SAME	YES	L/R	B	NO	NONE	NONE	R	L	NO	L	W	STR	I	S
121058	4TH	M	S	NO	LATE NEW YORK	THICK	BEV PIN	THIN	SAME	YES	L/R	B	NO	NO	MOVE	NONE	R	L	YES	H	W	STR	B	N
128052	4TH	M	L	NO	LATE NEW YORK	THICK	BEV PIN	THIN	SAME	NO	L/R	B	NO	NO	4	NONE	R	L	YES	H	W	STR	I	S
143769	4TH	M	L	NO	LATE NEW YORK	THICK	BEV D/T	THIN	SAME	YES	L/R	B	YES	?	7	NONE	R	L	YES	H	W	STR	B	NONE
156716	4TH	M	L	?	LATE NEW YORK	THICK	BEV PIN	THIN	SAME	NO	S/R	B	YES	YES	NONE	NONE	R	L	YES	H	W	STR	B	S
186328	4TH	L	L	YES	LATE NEW YORK	THICK	BEV PIN	THICK	SAME	YES	L/R	I	YES	YES	NONE	NONE	R	L	YES	H	W	STR	I	S
213806	4TH	L	L	NO	LATE NEW YORK	THICK	BEV PIN	THICK	SAME	NO	L/R	B	NO	NO	NONE	NONE	R	L	YES	H	IV.	✓	B	S

PLATE 12

The lower gun is a Late Third Model with a combination of (1) the rammer screw still entering from the same side with a (2) beveled loading notch. The three guns shown here (Plate 17) are the Fourth Model, which have the large rounded trigger guard. The same situation exists in the Fourth Model as in the Third Model, that is, there are three physical variations in this model also.

The three physical variations are a combination of (1) the Early Frame without the cap slot (2) the Late Frame with the improvement of the cap slot and (3) the thick loading lever catch under the muzzle end of the barrel.



PLATE 13

The upper gun is an Early Fourth Model with a combination of the Early Frame (without the cap slot) and (2) the thin loading lever catch. The middle gun is a Middle Fourth Model with a combination of (1) the Late Frame with the improvement of the cap slot and (2) the thin loading lever catch.

The bottom gun is a Late Fourth Model, with a combination of (1) the Late Frame with the cap slot and (2) the thick loading lever catch.

That's about all; so I'll get the Colt Navy show off the road with two short remarks. First, my sincere appreciation to Dr. R. L. Moore, Jr. for the excellent photos you have just seen, and second, my only hope is that you have enjoyed this little presentation just one half as much as I have enjoyed giving it. Thank you.



PLATE 14



PLATE 15

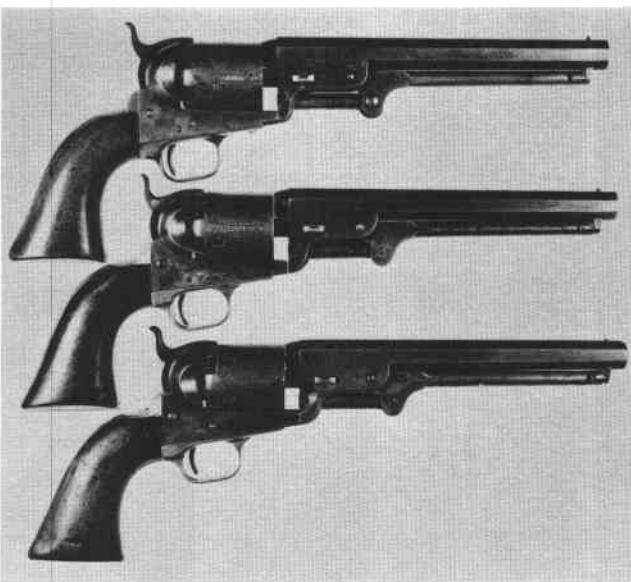


PLATE 16



PLATE 17