



# The Antique Arms Gazette

Newsletter of Old Guns Canada, Delta BC Vol. 1 No. 9

[www.oldgunscanada.com](http://www.oldgunscanada.com)

## The Thrill of the Hunt

Non-collectors often ask me why I have so many guns. To them, they all look more or less the same, and they can't understand why I would spend so much time accumulating even more. Collectors understand; and the reasons are multiple: for one, most collectible items – be they coins, stamps, pocket watches, razors (yes, I know a collector of antique razors), guns, you name it, come in many variations and once you have developed an interest, you find you need to have all the different types there are, and when you find out that there are even more variations out there, you want to track them down and find them for your collection. This is a case of the whole being bigger than the sum of its parts – the collection is more valuable or desirable because the different variations have been brought together in one place. Another reason, especially in the case of antiques, is the interest in the historical context of the collection, or perhaps a particular maker. Many collectors are collectors of more than one thing – it's a life-long hobby and may shift from one subject to another over time. While non-collectors may laugh at us and consider us "hoarders", the collector has a very unique quality – the desire to assemble, organize and study a given subject systematically and with a degree of order and purpose (one would hope...). Value aside, the biggest thrill of collecting (for me, anyway) is the "thrill of the hunt" – looking for, and finding that elusive specimen. I have written about the buying process before, so I won't get into it again, suffice it to say that the thrill is definitely a big part. Sometimes it's a particular piece you are looking for, and then you suddenly, and often entirely unexpectedly find it, and sometimes it's an interesting, elusive specimen which peaks your interest, and after doing some research you find out that, OMG! this is something truly unusual or special! Something like that can really make my day! I have found a few

oddball guns in my collecting days, some I could never identify completely, and some I was able to trace back to their roots. I have a few which still have me stumped, and others I can now put down as "case solved". Of course, the easiest and most desirable qualities are a maker's name, patent dates, model numbers, serial numbers, and in the case of European guns, proof marks and inspection stamps. This type of information lets you at least date a gun and establish origin, period, and sometimes value as well. American guns are not proofed, and there is no government system for proofing and inspecting firearms, except those for military service. In that case, it is often possible to identify a particular gun right down to the period of manufacture and even the military unit it was assigned to. Commercially manufactured and sold guns do not offer this helpful quality though, and the collector has to contend himself with an approximation of the gun's origin. I believe only Colt and S&W will offer research help (at a cost) in tracing specific guns by serial number to a date of manufacture and the customer (usually a sporting goods retailer or hardware store) to whom it was delivered. This is usually where the "provenance" ends, unless the gun was engraved by the new owner, or there is evidence of the gun's history provided by the various owners over time. Often the specimen's history can be narrowed down by examining specific characteristics, such as caliber, cylinder configuration, grip and frame shape, type of finish, etc. and this is where the "variations" become interesting – guns of seemingly universal and ubiquitous manufacture suddenly turn out to have an odd-ball cousin previously unheard of. This is where the collector's ears perk, and his interest is aroused. Take the Whitney Model 1 pocket revolver, for example. Collectors have always known the Model 1 as being a .22 rim fire pocket revolver, and it is fairly common. However, rumour had it that there was a .30 caliber variation of this gun, also called a

Model 1, a rumour substantiated by period advertisements of such a specimen. No one had seen one though, until fairly recently. In about 2008 the first of these .30 caliber variants came to light. The RCMP Firearms Technical Division was not aware of this variant until about six months ago, and they had to create a new reference table just for this model...



Four Whitneyville Model 1's in .30 cal



**Oddball Belgian Percussion Revolver:**  
The design is similar to the 1850's Colt and Manhattan pocket revolvers however the proof marks date it as having been manufactured after 1893.





The cylinder is marked with what looks like crossed flags, alternating with a "Crown over A" – the mark of Antoine Masereel of Liege. The crossed flags or keys were used by more than one maker. They are bogus marks, and have no specific meaning.



The cylinder scene depicts a city with a bridge and sailing ships, but also a steam ship. This is obviously supposed to be the Colt "Brooklyn Bridge" roll engraving. Apparently these cheap percussion revolvers were still made up until WW1 for sale in the "Colonies"...

**William Walker Marston**

W. W. Marston was born in Deal, England in 1822, son of Stanhope Walker Marston and his wife Mary, nee Rigden. The Marston's emigrated to America in about 1835 and by 1843 Stanhope was well established as a gun smith and maker in New York City. Young William would soon follow in his father's footsteps and by 1856 we find William listed in the NY business directory first time as the principal of the business. Prior to this, "Sprague & Marston" was listed however this may have been William's father Stanhope. William made a name for himself as an innovator, inventor and skilled gun maker in every respect, and his creations are now considered iconic examples of American gun development. His three-barrelled, superposed deringer is famous, and fine specimens fetch huge sums at auction. His pocket revolver, similar to the First Model Whitney, is of very fine quality, and

was available as a short-barrelled pocket model as well as full-size. The pocket went through at least seven versions, each an improvement on the previous. About 13,000 pocket revolvers came out of the shop of W. W. Marston. Another, less successful model was his Navy, of which he produced only about 1,000. Again, similarities to Whitney and Remington martial models are evident, the cylinders having actually been made by Whitney for his use. Marston marketed his guns under various names beside his own – Phenix Armory, Western Arms and Union Arms. In 1862 his shops at E22nd St were severely damaged by fire, and for a while



**W. W. Marston Pocket Revolver, 7<sup>th</sup> Model**



**W. W. Marston Superposed 3-barrel deringer**

there was no production, and no product to be had, while the firm restructured and rebuilt. In 1866 Marston was granted a patent for a wood and stone carving machine using a mechanical arm which allowed the operator to transfer the carving from a template to a block of wood or stone. W. W. Marston died in 1872, and with him, the business of W. W. Marston Fire Arms Manufacturing Co.

**Colt Cartridge Conversions**

If there was one major blunder in the stellar existence of Sam Colt, it was his failure to realize the importance of the emerging metallic cartridge in the 1850's. Of course, it is easy for us to criticize his actions some 150 years later, as hindsight apparently has 20/20 vision... Percussion arms were the height of technological know-how, and some minor gunsmith's fancyful idea of boring through the cylinder from end to end and loading a metallic cartridge from behind seemed like a

passing fad. It was Rollin White, who, while in the employ of Sam Colt, came up with this idea and had it patented in 1855. Colt had invested heavily in his percussion arms tooling, and a conversion to cartridge arms was met with resistance right from the start. The fact that White wanted one million dollars for his patent did not help matters. Colt refused, and White went to Smith and Wesson instead. After Sam Colt's death in January 1862, the firm was run by his widow and a group of loyal and talented senior employees, but they, too, neglected to see the importance of the cartridge. By 1865, as the civil war wound down, White was eager to unload his half share of the patent and was willing to sell it to Colt for \$500,000, but again, he was rebuked, partly because the patent was due to expire in 1869. By now the gun making world had firmly embraced the cartridge trend, and many systems came on the market trying to circumvent the White / S&W patent. Colt was among those who tried to create their own cartridge conversions of their popular percussion revolvers – the 1849, the 1862 Police, the Pocket Navy, even the 1851 saw itself converted to cartridge use. Alexander Thuer's front-loading design was one of the most inventive, primarily because it allowed the gun's cylinder to be switched back to cap-and-ball, if so desired. Thuer conversions were manufactured from 1869 to 1872, but by then the Rollin White patent had expired and the more convenient breech-loading cartridge guns became the norm. But, even then, with the large inventory of percussion revolvers still on hand, the firm found itself forced to convert more and more of its percussion inventory to cartridge use in order to sell them. The preferred caliber was .38 and .44 rim fire, but they were made in .31 and .36 as well. Between 1869 and the late 1870's some 46,000 conversions, both Thuer, and Richards-Mason were performed on existing percussion inventory at the Colt factory. These guns are in themselves an important era of Colt firearms development. "No specialty in collecting of Colt firearms is more challenging and perplexing than the conversions." writes R. L. Wilson in "The Colt Heritage". Old Guns Canada will be offering several of these in the near future.



**Two Colt Pocket Navy's converted to .38rf**