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Eben Starr

Ebenezer Starr was a talented engineer and inventor who is often credited for being the first to develop a practical double-action revolver in 1858 (although there were several other designs, some superior to Starr's, already patented as early as 1850). The M1858 was first produced in .36 caliber however in order to secure lucrative military contracts he had to increase the caliber to a man-stopping .44. The military brass was suitably impressed with the new-fangled "double action" mechanism and the US Ordnance Department procured some 5000 units at a cost of \$25 apiece, which was a lot in those days – Colts went for an average \$16, and the Lefauchaux M1854 was purchased at an average \$12 each, although after the outbreak of the civil war the eager ordnance people would purchase any sidearm they could lay their hands on over-the-counter from US retailers for as much as twice that price. By 1863 the orders for Starr double-actions had increased to some 23,000. The Starr had some advantageous features – but also many drawbacks: the solid-frame design and rugged ratchet mechanism spoke well for its usefulness in the field while the danger of losing the cross-bolt which kept the hinged cylinder in place would be a detriment in battle. The ease of access to the cylinder via the hinged frame makes swapping out the cylinder easy and quick – much faster than the two-piece barrel and frame design Colt used which was stuck together with a steel wedge. (Remington's solid frame design would outperform Colt in many ways). Another drawback was the ratchet at the rear of the cylinder – it was a separate part attached with a screw to the rear of the cylinder and could come loose, and be lost, making the cylinder useless. Finally, the whole "double action" idea met with a lot of scepticism from the rank-and-file. While the desk jockeys in the ordnance department thought it a grand idea, those who had to use the gun in the field were less impressed. At this point one has to remember that until that time there was only one mechanism known in the ignition of a powder charge.

No matter if flint, percussion, or (later) cartridge ignition, the customary motion for a single action gun was to cock the hammer with the shooting hand's thumb, take aim and then pull the trigger to release the hammer and ignite the powder charge. Now, some paper-pushing engineer came along to tell the soldier that he had to pull the trigger first, in order to cock the hammer (it could not be cocked using the thumb alone), and then move the trigger finger off the trigger, and behind it to depress a little button at the rear of the trigger guard in order to release the hammer. Alternately, a small tab on the back of the trigger could be adjusted in such a manner as to make the pulling of the trigger and subsequent falling of the hammer one continuous motion, which was the true intention of the "double action". For any soldier or officer in whom the single-action motion was ingrained, this new way of doing things would surely seem ridiculous. Stories of problems with the new gun abounded – issues with accuracy, ability to exchange cylinders, confusion over how the "tab" had to be set – losing the tab altogether... the criticism persuaded the Ordnance Department to suspend all further purchases until Starr could come up with a more traditional, single-action design. The new single-action M1858 was introduced in 1863, and by 1865 when the war ended, Starr had made more of the single-action guns than they had made in double-action. Some 32,000 were produced and most were sold to the Union Army. Serial numbering for the new single-action continued in the same range as the double-action, starting somewhere near the 23,000 mark. Aside from the obvious difference in the action, the only other difference between the two guns was the single-action's 8-inch barrel, compared to the double-action's 6-inch. The Starr is often called the "forgotten gun of the civil war", over-shadowed by the three main Colt designs – the 1851 Navy, the 1860 Army and 1861 Navy, and by the Remington Beals Army and Navy, Old Model Army and Navy, and New Model Army and Navy revolvers.

Starr revolvers were the third most used side arms in the American conflict but largely forgotten until one was featured prominently in the Clint Eastwood Western "The Unforgiven".



Clint Eastwood with a Starr M1858



However, the M1858 was not Eben Starr's only creation. His first venture into gun making was a 5-shot, double-action pepperbox for which he received a patent in 1856. The records indicate that five of them were delivered to the Washington Navy Yard in 1857 for testing but none were ordered. After his success with the M1858, Starr Arms of Yonkers and Binghamton, NY were contracted to supply the Union with a .52 caliber single-shot carbine, of

Which some 5,000 were delivered by May of 1865, at a time when the civil war had ended. Starr also patented a small four-barrel pepperbox similar in design to that of Christian Sharps, and a single-shot derringer. These were made exclusively by the Merrill Patent Firearms Co. of Maryland, however. The Starr Arms Company ceased business operations in 1867.



Excellent condition, martially marked Starr M1858 Double Action revolver



Rogers & Spencer

The firm of Rogers & Spencer of Uthica, NY was known until 1865 as the contract manufacturers of the Pettengill percussion revolvers in Army and Navy calibers. In 1864 they submitted their own design of Army revolver to the US Ordnance Department. It is an improved version of the similar Freeman revolver, and also bears resemblance to Remington's New Model Army. The war had dragged on for over three years by then, and many an industrial manufacturer tried to capitalize on the conflict by petitioning the US government for contracts. Rogers & Spencer's design was indeed impressive; their gun was well made, well designed, and fit the US Ordnance requirements. Not knowing the future, of course, the government ordered 5,000 units, with 1500 to be delivered early in 1865 and the remainder later that year. Delays in completion pushed the first delivery forward to April 1865, just as the war ended. The remainder would not be delivered until September. From a bureaucrat's perspective, this was a bit of a bungle: 5,000 new sidearms of a basically obsolete design, at a time when all modern armed forces converted their weaponry to cartridge use, and at the same time, the end of a war with a huge surplus of returned service arms to the arsenals around the country. However, the

Government was bound by contract and accepted delivery of all 5,000 units. Records indicate that they went straight into storage, never to be issued or used. R&S made a further 800 or so for civilian sale, however the majority of the production landed in a warehouse to be forgotten for 36 years...

In 1901, during an army house-cleaning the entire lot of 5,000 guns was sold at auction to Francis Bannerman of New York for pennies on the dollar. Bannerman sold them through his catalog for years thereafter to collectors around the country. It is for this reason that we can still find near-mint, military inspected Rogers & Spencer Army revolvers on the antique market today. For a martial sidearm this is truly rare...



Excellent Rogers & Spencer Army in .44 Percussion



Ordnance Inspector RPB (Capt. R. P. Barry, US Ordnance) cartouche on grip



Rogers & Spencer Uthica, NY

The Wesson Gun Making Heritage

No other names in American gun manufacture are more widely known and respected than those of Samuel Colt and the Wesson brothers. While many volumes of books have been written about Colt and his inventions, the work of the Wesson brothers is still largely unknown, except of that of Daniel Wesson, of course, famous co-founder of Smith & Wesson. It is because of Dan's fame that the work of the other two brothers is somewhat overshadowed. There were three brothers who all went into the gun making business. The oldest, Edwin, was a noted maker of fine, handcrafted muzzle-loading target and sporting rifles, and teacher to his two younger siblings. He was a true craftsman and artisan. His small, individually crafted array of fine weapons is extremely rare and impossible to find today. The younger Daniel, of course, went on to become one of the most successful industrial giants of 19th century America, and the firm is still in business today. Dan was of the true 19th century, Industrial Revolution mindset: the days of the artisan were over, and the era of mass production had begun: Dan Wesson was not satisfied with small, individually crafted guns; the future was in quality mass-produced products which were made to such close tolerances that parts could be interchanged, assembled in vast quantities, and sold at comparatively low prices. Frank, on the other hand, fell in between the extremes of Edwin and Daniel. Although he, too, embraced the idea of mass production, his ventures would never reach the size and volume of those of S&W. Frank concentrated on civilian market goods – odd inventions and specialized applications: he is well known for his “pocket rifles”, target pistols and small derringers, but also produced many military rifles for use in the civil war. Frank did join forces for a while with his nephew Gilbert Harrington to produce a series of spur-trigger revolvers for which Harrington had received a patent in 1871. The firm of “Wesson & Harrington” was short lived, however, and dissolved in 1874. Frank would return to his former, individual business while Harrington would take on a new partner, former employee William Richardson, to form “Harrington & Richardson”. Wesson died in 1899, and with him the firm of Frank Wesson.



Frank Wesson Deringer